THE Nation.

RACE TO THE BOTTOM

FROM SEAN BELL TO REV. WRIGHT
Patricia J. Williams

THE MISSING DEBATE
Stephen F. Cohen

LETTER FROM IRAN
Robert Dreyfuss

OBAMA UNBOUND
Ta-Nehisi Coates

HOW HILLARY CLINTON'S CAMPAIGN HAS DIVIDED THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT
BETSY REED

MAY 19, 2008
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Letters

McCain Express to Nowhere?

Pinon, Ariz.
I have two problems with Rick Perlstein's "All Aboard the McCain Express" [April 21]. First, there is no guarantee that the conservative era is over. It is entirely possible that John McCain will win in November. Second, George W. Bush has not been conservative in the least; he's been the head of a right-wing reactionary movement. McCain was perhaps conservative for a while, but he has abandoned his positions for the reactionary ones championed by Bush.
Mim Jackson

Galesville, Wis.
I may be a dumb trucker, but here's my opinion: I hope John McCain will not be our next President. The trigger-happy McCain solution to our problems is to move us closer to being the world's policeman. He would divert money from healthcare, education and the environment to an expanded military. McCain, the 100-year-war monger, is as much a threat to our freedom as Bush/Cheney.
Otto Riemer

St. Charles, Mo.
As a social and fiscal conservative, I will not vote for John McCain. He fails the good-guy test. Only Obama passes the good-guy test—before we get to political questions. I am the polar opposite of Obama, but if McCain says or does whatever works to his political advantage, I cannot support him. I have not voted for a Democrat since I was 18, but I am closer than I have ever been.
Dan Clayton

Riverside, Calif.
Y'all are missing the point about McCain, the Panamanchurian candidate. He is the GOP sacrificial lamb in 2008. Like Bob Dole in 1996, the GOP is throwing him under the bus. So what's a true, non-neocon Republican to do? Support RINO McCain? No—he has so much baggage he'll be torpedoed. Support Dr. Paul, the true conservative? Sure; that would give the Democrats a run for their money. But they won't. Go third party? Why not? It would be a strong message to the GOP. No matter how it is sliced, the GOP is royally screwed.
Michael Seebeck

Some Very Cross Words

Brooklyn, N.Y.
As a longtime reader of *The Nation*, I was shocked, appalled, horrified when I got my May 5 issue and sat down to read it, then solve Frank Lewis's puzzle, as I do with every issue. *No puzzle!!* Biweekly? *Biweekly!!!* Not enough. Bring it back weekly. I am bereft without it.
Deborah Siner

Berkeley, Calif.
OMG! What happened to the puzzle? It's my reason for getting up in the morning.
Lisa Bullwinkel

Fort Worth
WHERE IS IT?!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Betty Brink

Phoenix
OMG!! Where is Frank? My issue just arrived, and there is no puzzle. My dirty little secret is that I subscribe because of the puzzle. If it goes, so do I.
Joyce H. Doyle

New York City
I have been a *Nation* subscriber for decades and an Associate for years. I will be neither in the future if the cryptic crossword continues to be replaced with idiotic fluff like the interview with Nicholson Baker. Fascinating though it was to learn that his books grow like strawberry plants, I prefer the puzzle.
Sandy Petrey

East Lansing, Mich.
I have just opened my *Nation*, and I am disturbed, upset and chagrined to find Frank W. Lewis's puzzle replaced by a page of "Back Talk." The only way I can get through all the depressing news in *The Nation* is first to work on the crossword. Please restore it. It's essential to my mental well-being.
Daniel Suits

letters@thenation.com

(continued on page 30)

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Our Lapdog Media

Stung by a *New York Times* exposé, the Defense Department has temporarily suspended a program of spoon-feeding war propaganda to retired military officers, who then regurgitate the swill on broadcast and cable TV. That's good news. But not good enough. The *Times* scoop gives new meaning to the term "late-breaking news." More than five years into a war that was spun into being and that continues to be spun as a surging success, top journalists are shocked, *shocked* to learn that there is spinning going on. And while the Pentagon may change its PR practices—prodded by House Armed Services Committee chair Ike Skelton's complaint that it is "basically using [retired officers] as pawns to spout the Administration's talking points of the day"—the American people are still stuck with "please lie to me" mass media that invite manipulation by government and well-connected private interests.

EDITORIAL

There are always honorable exceptions, but the tendency of the corporate press is to serve as stenographer for the powerful rather than the muscular check and balance intended by the country's founders. Rapid consolidation has brought us dumbed-down media, with broadcast and cable networks that rarely challenge the status quo, even as they maintain their monopolistic stranglehold on the airwaves. What do the people get in return? A diet of "news" and commentary with retired generals telling us quagmire wars are going well, former CEOs telling us a sputtering economy is "basically sound" and former political aides telling us presidential campaigns are about lapel pins and made-up scandals.

It is no great leap to go from a former general defending Administration strategies for Iraq to former White House counselor George Stephanopoulos turning an ABC News "debate" into a rehash of Jeremiah Wright sound bites, "ties" to 1960s radicals, a Bosnian airstrip or whatever else steers the discourse away from crucial matters like war, recession, skyrocketing gas prices and healthcare costs, and the global food crisis. (Soon after the ABC moderators were roundly criticized for trivializing that forum, the TV pundits were back at it again, resurrecting the Reverend Wright "controversy" after the pastor made a series of public appearances.) The constant is a major media system that, with all too few exceptions, sacrifices real journalism for access and abandons debate on real issues for manufactured controversy.

What should we do when Big Media fails democracy? First, don't let it get even bigger. As News Corp attempts to grab a third New York–area newspaper—the venerable *Newsday*—Rupert Murdoch and other press barons are lobbying to strike down the historic ban on newspaper ownership of broadcast outlets in local markets. Eliminating that barrier would reduce diversity, competition and journalistic quality even further. The Federal Communications Commission has voted to begin dismantling this and other longstanding media ownership limits, but the Senate Commerce Committee has pushed back, endorsing a "legislative veto" of the FCC move.

The full Senate and the House should move swiftly to reject more consolidation, but they can't stop there. Congress should investigate the Pentagon's propaganda programs with an eye to determining whether laws were broken, especially regarding the sharing of classified information. Congress should also broaden its investigation into how the Administration and its media allies have politicized communications. And the presidential candidates should stop playing the media's game and start addressing the role Big Media has played in debasing rather than illuminating this historic election.

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Robert Dreyfuss: Don't attack Iran

Jayati Vora: Columbia remembers 1968

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Will Wright damage Obama?

Obama Under the Weather

COMMENT

From 1993 to 2002 Barack Obama served on the board of the Woods Fund, a small foundation in Chicago devoted to supporting a main passion of Obama's: community organizing. Unless you worked in the philanthropic world or regularly watched Fox News, you'd probably never heard of the Woods Fund before ABC's April 16 Democratic debate. As part of a barrage of guilt-by-association questioning, co-moderator George Stephanopoulos asked Obama about his connection to another Woods Fund board member, Bill Ayers, a former '60s radical and ringleader of the Weather Underground. In an interview with the *New York Times*, coincidentally published on 9/11, Ayers, reflecting on his memoir, *Fugitive Days*, had said inartfully, "I don't regret setting bombs. I feel we didn't do enough." Ayers, who meant that he wished the antiwar movement had ended the Vietnam War sooner, clarified in a letter to the *Times*, "My memoir is from start to finish a condemnation of terrorism." Taken out of context, the statement sparked outrage, leading Stephanopoulos to ask Obama, "Can you explain that relationship for the voters, and explain to Democrats why it won't be a problem?"

Obama responded that he lives in the same neighborhood as Ayers on Chicago's South Side, did not exchange ideas with him on a regular basis and was only 8 when the Weather Underground was violently protesting the war. Eager to keep the issue alive, Hillary Clinton jumped in, noting, "Senator Obama served on a board with Mr. Ayers for a period of time, the Woods Fund, which was a paid directorship position." The Clinton campaign has since distributed a document slamming Obama for, among other things, praising Ayers's 1997 book on juvenile-justice reform and appearing on two panels with him. In an interview on the Sunday after the debate, Stephanopoulos asked John McCain about Obama's "patriotism." "I'm sure he's very patriotic," McCain responded. "But his relationship with Mr. Ayers is open to question." *National Review* subsequently said of the McCain campaign, "They'll hold nothing back when the topic is William Ayers." Suddenly every prominent news organization and right-wing blogger was "exposing" the Woods Fund, accusing it of harboring domestic terrorists and damaging Obama's candidacy. Said a spokesman, "We are under siege."

At the beginning of the campaign a few reporters called to explore Obama's background as a community organizer. Soon enough the right learned of his association with Ayers, who had hosted a fundraiser for Obama in 1996 and contributed $200 to his state senate campaign in 2001. The coverage took on a sinister tone, and misinformation quickly spread. The foundation was labeled anti-Israel by the fringe blog WorldNetDaily because it gave a $40,000 grant to the Arab American Action Network, a community organizing group that provides social services to Arab immigrants in Chicago. Woods Fund Could Become Obama's 'Swift Boat,' declared the *Wall Street Journal*.

Lost in the media brouhaha are the facts about what the Woods Fund actually does, why it attracted someone like Obama and how Ayers came to be on its board. This story is less sexy than the current gotcha games, but the composition of the or-

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ganization and its commitment to community organizing tell us a lot more about Obama than mischaracterizations of his association with Ayers. As Michelle Obama once put it, "Barack is not a politician first and foremost. He's a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change."

The Woods Fund, in many ways, is responsible for helping start Obama as an organizer and shaping his political identity. In 1985 the foundation gave a $25,000 grant to the Developing Communities Project, which hired Obama, at 24, as an organizer on Chicago's economically depressed South Side. Obama became friendly with Woods director Jean Rudd, and after he graduated from Harvard Law School and moved back to Chicago, Rudd asked him to join the board, which met four times a year to review grant proposals. (Obama also served on the board of the larger Joyce Foundation, which specialized in environmental conservation, welfare reform and education.) "Community organizing was a central priority of this foundation, so more and more we drew him in," says Rudd, who retired in 2000.

"The fact that we were one of the few foundations that funded grassroots community organizing appealed to him," says Deborah Harrington, a veteran of Illinois government who joined the fund in 1999 and took over as president in 2006. "Being on the board kept Obama grounded and gave him a pulse of what was happening at the grassroots level."

Established by Nebraska businessmen in 1941, with a current endowment of $68 million and annual grants totaling $3 million—a tiny figure in the foundation world—the Woods Fund has taken risks that larger foundations can't. It awards hundreds of small grants a year, usually no larger than $50,000, to activists, neighborhood groups, think tanks, and arts and culture projects in Chicago's most-forgotten and blighted communities. It has funded ex-offenders to lobby for the elimination of mandatory minimum sentences and unfair drug laws, organized senior citizens to advocate for affordable housing, pushed parents to get more involved in their children's crumbling schools. The fund has linked public policy groups with community organizers—wonks with activists—a particular interest of Obama's. "The grants are small, but the impact is significant," says Jesus Garcia, vice chair of the board and the first Mexican-American elected to the Illinois senate.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, the Woods Fund was at the forefront of the movement to reform Chicago's public schools, stressing the need for more local control and community involvement. That focus on education led the fund to Ayers, a tenured professor of education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and a widely published expert on the subject. "The foundation had a special interest in the Chicago public schools, and Bill's specialty is teaching teachers," Rudd explains. "He had built a great reputation in that field." Ayers joined the board in 1999, serving as chair for two years and overlapping with Obama until 2002, when Obama left to run for the US Senate.

In 2006 Laura Washington, a DePaul University professor of humanities and a columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, took over as chair. "Bill has been painted in the media as a cardboard caricature of a guy who threw bombs," she says. "That's not the Bill I know, and that's not the Bill I ever knew. He has

Noted.

FOOD CRISIS, USA: According to the **American Farm Bureau Federation**, the total cost of sixteen basic grocery items increased by about 8 percent between the fourth quarter of 2007 and the first quarter of 2008. Some price hikes you might see in your grocery bill include:

§ Five-pound bag of flour:
up 69 cents to $2.39;
§ One pound of cheddar cheese:
up 61 cents to $4.71;
§ Thirty-two-ounce bottle of corn oil:
up 58 cents to $3.01;
§ One dozen large eggs:
up 55 cents to $2.16;
§ Thirty-two-ounce jar of mayonnaise:
up 22 cents to $3.14;
§ Five-pound bag of russet potatoes:
up 18 cents to $2.47;
§ Twenty-ounce loaf of white bread:
up 16 cents to $1.78;
§ One pound of apples:
up 13 cents to $1.40;
§ One pound of ground chuck:
up 4 cents to $2.73.

WRIGHT-BOATING: Mississippi Democrat **Travis Childers** almost scored a historic upset in an April 22 special election for what had been a Republican House seat. A populist critic of free trade and the Iraq War, he took 49 percent of the vote, more than any other candidate. In most states, that would have sent him to Congress. But Mississippi holds a runoff whenever a candidate falls short of 50 percent, so Childers will face Republican **Greg Davis** on May 13. Scared by the Democrat's strength, Davis is airing ads that blast Childers for accepting the endorsement of "liberal Barack Obama." But it's not Obama's liberalism that is emphasized; it's his former pastor. Juxtaposing Childers's face with footage of the Rev. **Jeremiah Wright**, the ad tells white swing voters: "When Obama's pastor cursed America, blaming us for 9/11, Childers said nothing. When Obama ridiculed rural folks for clinging to guns and religion, Childers said nothing.… He took Obama's endorsement over our conservative values." Ouch!

The point of the ad is twofold: Republicans want to beat Childers, but they also hope to frighten Democrats into distancing themselves from the party's likely presidential nominee. The strategy seems to be working; Childers is saying he never accepted Obama's support and has denounced the "lies and attacks linking me to politicians I don't know." It's all part of National Republican Congressional Committee chairman **Tom Cole**'s elaborate strategy to "nationalize" House races, bolstering weak GOP contenders by turning the contests into "referendums… on Obama"—and, of course, Wright. Anyone who thinks the Obama-Clinton primary race has been unsettling should recognize that the campaign season is about to get a whole lot uglier. JOHN NICHOLS

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changed his life, built on the lessons of the '60s and become a civic leader in this city." Indeed, after the ABC News debate, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley—hardly a radical leftist—put out a statement calling Ayers a "nationally recognized distinguished professor of education" and "a valued member of the Chicago community." Former '60s Radical Is Now Considered Mainstream in Chicago, said the *Washington Post* on April 18. Ayers/Obama Connection Brings 'So What?' Reaction in Chicago Media, said *Editor & Publisher*.

Today Woods's eight-member board includes three academics, a civic leader, a former Illinois state senator and executives from the BP oil company, UBS investment bank and Sahara Enterprises. Former board members include R. Eden Martin (1996–2004), attorney for the law firm Sidley Austin and president of the Commercial Club, Chicago's most prestigious business group. "The board is comprised of a very representative group of Chicago civic leaders," says Adele Simmons, of Chicago, a former president of the MacArthur Foundation.

Because of its small size and local focus, Woods enjoyed relative anonymity until this year's presidential campaign. Its grants were about community empowerment, social change and elevating marginalized voices, not political grandstanding. "They invest in giving poor and working people a voice in how their city runs," says Deepak Bhargava of the Center for Community Change, in Washington (and *Nation* editorial board member). "I don't know how much more apple pie you can get."

The effort of the Clinton campaign to feed the media frenzy is particularly ironic, given Hillary's six-year tenure on the board of Wal-Mart and directorship, in the late '80s, of the New World Foundation, which is to the left of the Woods Fund and considerably more political in its grant-making. In the '90s conservatives slammed New World—and by extension Clinton—for funding the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, the National Lawyers Guild and Grassroots International, which backed two PLO-affiliated groups on the West Bank while Hillary was on the board. At the time Stuart Eizenstat, Bill Clinton's deputy Treasury secretary, called the reports "erroneous, irrelevant and outrageous slander on Hillary Clinton." That's a pretty good description of what Obama and his former colleagues are enduring today. ARI BERMAN

Ari Berman, a Nation *contributing writer, is a Puffin Foundation Reporting Fellow at The Nation Institute.*

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

John McCain, Demonstrating His Intention to Make Inroads Among African-American Voters, Speaks at One of the Legendary Battlegrounds of The Civil Rights Movement

McCain took the Straight Talk to Selma—
To speak to the black folks, of course.
He spoke at the bridge there in Selma,
And white people showed up in force.

The Missing Debate

None of the remaining presidential candidates have seriously addressed, or even seem fully aware of, what should be our greatest foreign policy concern—Russia's singular capacity to endanger or enhance our national security. Overshadowed by the US disaster in Iraq, Moscow's importance will continue long after that war ends.

COMMENT

Despite its diminished status following the Soviet breakup in 1991, Russia alone possesses weapons that can destroy the United States, a military-industrial complex nearly America's equal in exporting arms, vast quantities of questionably secured nuclear materials sought by terrorists and the planet's largest oil and natural gas reserves. It also remains the world's largest territorial country, pivotally situated in the West and the East, at the crossroads of colliding civilizations, with strategic capabilities from Europe, Iran and other Middle East nations to North Korea, China, India, Afghanistan and even Latin America. All things considered, our national security may depend more on Russia than Russia's does on us.

And yet US-Russian relations are worse today than they have been in twenty years. The relationship includes almost as many serious conflicts as it did during the cold war—among them, Kosovo, Iran, the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia, Venezuela, NATO expansion, missile defense, access to oil and the Kremlin's internal politics—and less actual cooperation, particularly in essential matters involving nuclear weapons. Indeed, a growing number of observers on both sides think the relationship is verging on a new cold war, including another arms race.

Even the current cold peace could be more dangerous than its predecessor, for three reasons: First, its front line is not in Berlin or the Third World but on Russia's own borders, where US and NATO military power is increasingly ensconced. Second, lethal dangers inherent in Moscow's impaired controls over its vast stockpiles of materials of mass destruction and thousands of missiles on hair-trigger alert, a legacy of the state's disintegration in the 1990s, exceed any such threats in the past. And third, also unlike before, there is no effective domestic opposition to hawkish policies in Washington or Moscow, only influential proponents and cheerleaders.

How did it come to this? Less than twenty years ago, in 1989-90, the Soviet Russian and American leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush, completing a process begun by Gorbachev and President Reagan, agreed to end the cold war, with "no winners and no losers," as even Condoleezza Rice once wrote, and begin a new era of "genuine cooperation." In the US policy elite and media, the nearly unanimous answer is that Russian President Vladimir Putin's antidemo-

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cratic domestic policies and "neo-imperialism" destroyed that historic opportunity.

You don't have to be a Putin apologist to understand that this is not an adequate explanation. During the last eight years, Putin's foreign policies have been largely a reaction to Washington's winner-take-all approach to Moscow since the early 1990s, which resulted from a revised US view of how the cold war ended [see Cohen, "The New American Cold War," July 10, 2006]. In that new triumphalist narrative, America "won" the forty-year conflict and post-Soviet Russia was a defeated nation analogous to post–World War II Germany and Japan—a nation without full sovereignty at home or autonomous national interests abroad.

The policy implication of that bipartisan triumphalism, which persists today, has been clear, certainly to Moscow. It meant that the United States had the right to oversee Russia's post-Communist political and economic development, as it tried to do directly in the 1990s, while demanding that Moscow yield to US international interests. It meant Washington could break strategic promises to Moscow, as when the Clinton Administration began NATO's eastward expansion, and disregard extraordinary Kremlin overtures, as when the Bush Administration unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty and granted NATO membership to countries even closer to Russia—despite Putin's crucial assistance to the US war effort in Afghanistan after September 11. It even meant America was entitled to Russia's traditional sphere of security and energy supplies, from the Baltics, Ukraine and Georgia to Central Asia and the Caspian.

Such US behavior was bound to produce a Russian backlash. It came under Putin, but it would have been the reaction of any strong Kremlin leader, regardless of soaring world oil prices. And it can no longer be otherwise. Those US policies—widely viewed in Moscow as an "encirclement" designed to keep Russia weak and to control its resources—have helped revive an assertive Russian nationalism, destroy the once strong pro-American lobby and inspire widespread charges that concessions to Washington are "appeasement," even "capitulationism." The Kremlin may have overreacted, but the cause and effect threatening a new cold war are clear.

Because the first steps in this direction were taken in Washington, so must be initiatives to reverse it. Three are essential and urgent: a US diplomacy that treats Russia as a sovereign great power with commensurate national interests; an end to NATO expansion before it reaches Ukraine, which would risk something worse than cold war; and a full resumption of negotiations to sharply reduce and fully secure all nuclear stockpiles and to prevent the impending arms race, which requires ending or agreeing on US plans for a missile defense system in Europe. My recent discussions with members of Moscow's policy elite suggest that there may still be time for such initiatives to elicit Kremlin responses that would enhance rather than further endanger our national security.

American presidential campaigns are supposed to discuss such vital issues, but senators McCain, Clinton and Obama have not done so. Instead, in varying degrees, each has promised to be "tougher" on the Kremlin than George W. Bush has allegedly been and to continue the encirclement of Russia and the hectoring "democracy promotion" there, both of which have only undermined US security and Russian democracy since the 1990s.

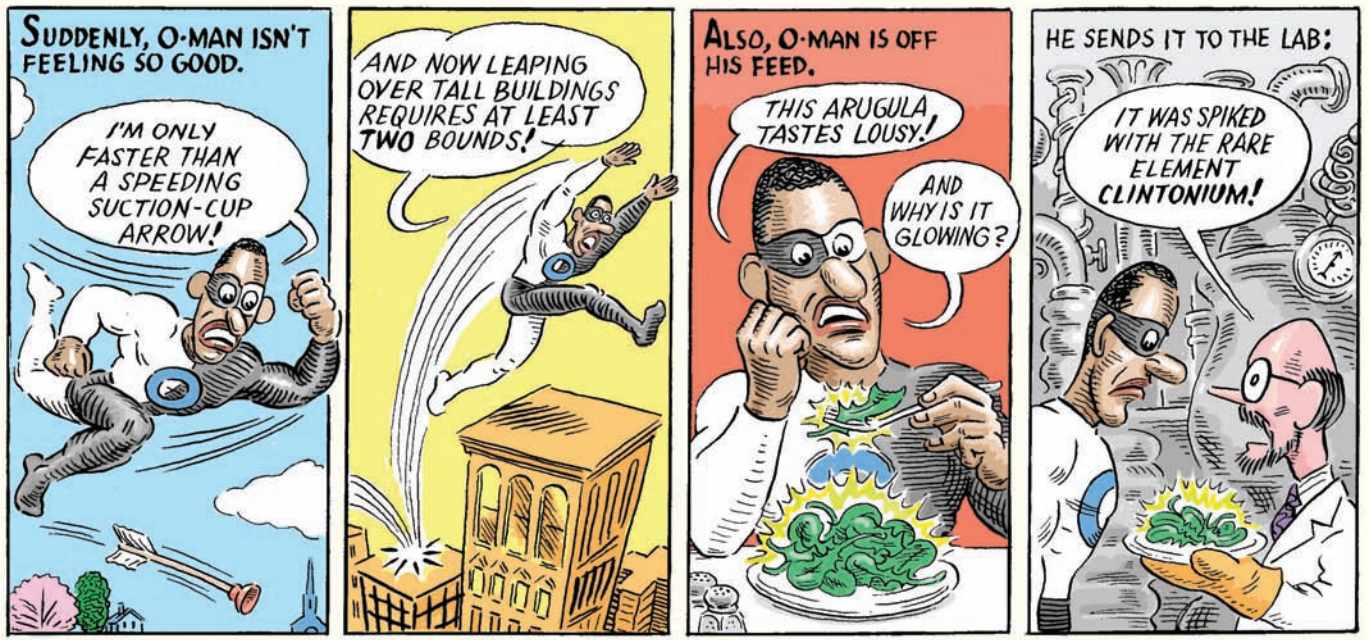
To be fair, no influential actors in American politics, including the media, have asked the candidates about any of these crucial issues. They should do so now before another chance is lost, in Washington and in Moscow. STEPHEN F. COHEN

Stephen F. Cohen is professor of Russian studies at New York University and professor of politics emeritus at Princeton University.

Comix Nation

TAINT FUNNY

by ROBERT GROSSMAN


SUDDENLY, O-MAN ISN'T FEELING SO GOOD.
I'M ONLY FASTER THAN A SPEEDING SUCTION-CUP ARROW!
AND NOW LEAPING OVER TALL BUILDINGS REQUIRES AT LEAST TWO BOUNDS!
ALSO, O-MAN IS OFF HIS FEED.
THIS ARUGULA TASTES LOUSY!
AND WHY IS IT GLOWING?
HE SENDS IT TO THE LAB:
IT WAS SPIKED WITH THE RARE ELEMENT CLINTONIUM!

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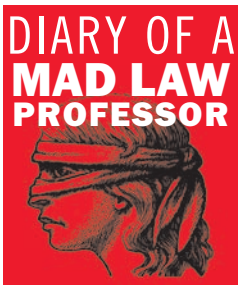
Patricia J. Williams

Let Them Eat Waffles

It seems not long ago I imagined a post-race, post-gendered Kumbaya moment in which the two Democratic candidates would be gamboling in slow motion across a pasture filled with buttercups and hope. Yet here I sit, pondering the dilemma of Hillary Clinton trying to convince the world that she's more willing than John McCain to "totally obliterate" Iran, while the "racially transcendent" Barack Obama's great dignity and intelligence are tirelessly berated in round-the-clock coverage of jibber-jabber from the crazy ex-minister of his church. "His electability is at stake," gloat the brainless, breathless commentators on Fox. Of course, if it weren't Reverend Wright, someone would find Obama's barber and record him saying something stupid and sensational. Or his plumber, or his grocer, or his dentist's grandmother. What's more, if people think this frenzy makes Hillary Clinton more "electable," then they haven't paused to consider that her turn is surely coming: I'm picturing earnest interviews with Bill Clinton's tobacconist and Monica Lewinsky's dry cleaner, chock-full of Shocking Details No One Ever Dreamed Of.



Apparently Obama's barber, plumber and grocer weren't at home. So they've had to let his waffles do the talking. In case you missed it, when Obama was campaigning in Pennsylvania, he went to a diner and had waffles for breakfast. Another patron scooped up his plate of uneaten remains and offered them for sale on eBay. The patron even specified that a DNA sample might be obtainable, since Obama's unwashed knife and fork were part of the deal. Bidding shot up to more than $20,000 before eBay removed the posting. Since then, the blogosphere has been abuzz with the epistemology of breakfast food. Are waffles truly the choice of champions? It was an effetely Belgian waffle, no less—as foreign and unpatriotic as a French fry!

This "post–civil rights" moment is not what I'd expected. In fact, it feels all too familiar. In New York City, Judge Arthur Cooperman found three undercover detectives not guilty of all charges in the fatal shooting of Sean Bell, an unarmed man leaving a club after a stag party early on the morning of his wedding day. The police shot fifty rounds at Bell's car, with some of the bullets going wild and lodging in buildings as far as a football field away. Yet even regarding misdemeanor charges of reckless endangerment because of these stray bullets, Judge Cooperman ruled that "questions of carelessness and incompetence must be left to other forums." While Bell's death was "tragic" and "unfortunate," he found that the prosecution had failed to prove that the detectives weren't justified, based on their perceptions at the time. I don't think much of the judge's statement, but I am more distressed by discussion taking the verdict as a blanket presumption in favor of whatever startled inner demons an officer "perceives." On the radio and chat shows one hears clichés to the effect that "no one can understand what it's like to be in their position" or "it's a dangerous job—you can't second-guess them."

We do ask police to do a dangerous job, but we ostensibly provide them with a set of ethical guidelines and a course of training culminating in an oath to "serve and protect." Our trust is based on those protocols as tools and those ethics as expectations. If we can't tell the difference between random bullets fired by a drive-by gang and those fired by a poorly trained, panicked policeman, then we are neither served nor protected. The lives of innocent citizens are endangered, and the legitimacy of the police as civic guardians is corroded. Moreover, when such unremediated and literal overkill occurs repeatedly and almost exclusively in poor black areas, it feeds a sense of abandonment and despair. It is a division that eats at the heart of our political unity.

How do we overcome the sad hypocrisy of our public discourse? We love to hate "emotionalism" and "inarticulateness" in black figures like Al Sharpton, yet we celebrate it as honest working-class populism in white figures like Bush and McCain's wild-eyed endorser, the Rev. John Hagee. We decry black middle schoolers who make fun of ambitious classmates for "talking white," yet the media heap sneering derision upon Obama for sounding too well educated for his own good.

We are at a crossroads that implicates us all. With our imploding housing market, rising unemployment, falling dollar and dismally noncompetitive educational achievement, we are all in the ghetto now. While some of us retire to the prison of gated communities, far too many are condemned to the disenfranchisement of real prisons. There are 2.3 million prisoners in the United States today, almost one and a half times the number in China, whose population is four times greater. Our incarceration rate is six times the median of all nations, and we imprison people for a much wider range of offenses and for longer sentences. Of our prisoners, the vast majority are black and Latino. Yet the degree to which these grave disparities are in some measure the product of our "perceptions" seems to have little traction. As I write, the latest version of Grand Theft Auto has been rolled out. The lines outside stores have been long enough to inspire a spike in consumer confidence. Hailed as a technological triumph, the game allows players to shoot up, blow up and otherwise incinerate a cyberworld that is the spitting image of New York, yet rather cynically named Liberty City. "It has its own morality," says a stockbroker friend who's a big fan. And that would be? "Uhmmm, well… It's war. Shoot first, ask questions later."

As I sift through exegeses about whether Obama is the anthropomorphized waffle in question, I wonder whether he, or any decent candidate, can survive this insane fetishization. I wonder how we, the people, are diminished by it. I wonder about the folly and fear that seduce us into seeing ourselves as at war with one another rather than as a unified polity. Mostly, I wonder whether we are trading in the dignity, egalitarianism and potential of our political birthright for a mess of half-eaten pottage—albeit with a cold link of sausage and some unwashed silverware on the side. ■

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Eric Alterman

Mickey Mouse Media

It has become a truth, all but universally acknowledged, that the final Democratic presidential debate, broadcast on the Disney-owned ABC network, was a journalistic disgrace and a political disaster. George Stephanopoulos and Charles Gibson alternated between the incomprehensibly trivial and the demonstrably false, giving the two-hour session the feel of a two-hour Republican infomercial, but with breaks for genuine corporate sponsors.

Stephanopoulos appeared to have allowed himself to be scripted by Sean Hannity, who earlier that day suggested the scurrilous line of inquiry that sought to tie Barack Obama to terrorist acts of the Weather Underground that took place when the candidate was 8 years old. It was hardly an improvement when, after almost an hour of smarmy and substanceless insinuation, the debate finally turned to real issues. Remarkably, the moderators—each of whom enjoys compensation in the millions—chose to berate both candidates for talking too tough to rich folk. "Can you make an absolute, read-my-lips pledge that there will be no tax increases of any kind for anyone earning under $200,000 a year?" Stephanopoulos demanded, this time sounding as if he was scripted by anti-tax evangelist Grover Norquist. Gibson, who had embarrassed himself at an earlier debate with the comically misinformed assertion that two University of New Hampshire faculty members could expect to enjoy an income of $200,000, also went to bat for Republican-style voodoo economics, insisting that the candidates pledge not to raise capital gains taxes. According to the most recent Census data, median income for an American family was $58,526. Just 5 percent of families enjoy annual incomes over $191,060. The average salary for a history professor, according to the American Historical Association, is $76,145. Remember, moreover, that this debate was occurring at a moment when, according to the Pew Research Center and the Gallup organization, "fewer Americans now than at any time in the past half century believe they're moving forward in life." It is, they say, the nation's "most downbeat short-term assessment of personal progress in nearly half a century of polling."

And no wonder. For working people, wages and salaries now make up the lowest share of the nation's gross domestic product since these data began to be collected more than sixty years ago. In 2005 the wealthiest 1 percent of the country earned 21.2 percent of all income, according to IRS data, while the bottom 50 percent of all Americans earned just 12.8 percent of all income, down from 13.4 percent a year earlier. That the two anchors felt it necessary to focus their questions for the candidates on lifting a tax that hits only the wealthiest 3 or 4 percent of Americans speaks volumes about the detachment of our plutocratic political class. It is perhaps no coincidence that the only support voiced for the wealthy anchors' line of questioning has come from such noted defenders of working-class interests as David Brooks, John Fund, Dorothy Rabinowitz and Lawrence Kudlow.

Of course, the shrinking state of working people's paychecks is not the only issue the networks and their cable affiliates have ignored during the debating season. As Media Matters' Jamison Foser has observed, "Through 17 debates this year, roughly 1,500 questions have been asked of the two parties' presidential candidates. But only a small handful of questions have touched on the candidates' views on executive power, the Constitution, torture, wiretapping, or other civil liberties concerns.… Only one question about wiretapping. Not a single question about FISA.… Not one question about renditions. The words 'habeas corpus' have not once been spoken by a debate moderator. Candidates have not been asked about telecom liability.… No moderator has asked a single question of a single candidate about whether the president should be able to order the indefinite detention of an American citizen, without charging the prisoner with any crime." (And remember, Disney/ABC used as its backdrop Philadelphia's National Constitution Center.)

What other topics might have proved illuminating in helping voters cast intelligent and informed votes for their next President? I'm sure we can all think of a few. Leaving aside the ones that are already dominating our headlines—if not our debates—any number of alarming problems in our society are going entirely unaddressed in this campaign and hence will likely remain so on Inauguration Day 2009. What, for instance, about the crisis in our criminal justice system? The United States jails roughly six times as many of its citizens as do most nations and nearly ten times that of comparable democracies. Do both candidates support the harsh sentencing guidelines and punitive drug laws that lie at the root of this disturbing trend?

And what of the fact that for first time since the flu epidemic of 1918, life expectancy is falling for many women in America, particularly in the Deep South, Appalachia, the Midwest, even parts of Maine? Simultaneously, the World Food Program explains that the worst food crisis since the end of World War II threatens the lives of 20 million of the world's poorest children. Food prices have risen 83 percent in three years, and the price of rice has more than doubled in just the past five weeks. Do the candidates wish to explain what they see as the root of these problems and the scope of responsibilities of the government in seeking to sustain human life here and abroad? Is, for instance, ethanol really the most efficacious use of corn, given its increasing scarcity where it is needed most?

Of course, the very idea of so sober and serious a televised debate in the current corporate media landscape puts one in mind of a feel-good fairy tale. And unfortunately, it's not the kind they specialize in at Disney. ■

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RACE TO THE BOTTOM

How Hillary Clinton's campaign has divided the feminist movement.

by BETSY REED

In the course of Hillary Clinton's historic run for the White House—in which she became the first woman ever to prevail in a state-level presidential primary contest—she has been likened to Lorena Bobbitt (by Tucker Carlson); a "hellish housewife" (Leon Wieseltier); and described as "witchy," a "she-devil," "anti-male" and "a stripteaser" (Chris Matthews). Her loud and hearty laugh has been labeled "the cackle," her voice compared to "fingernails on a blackboard" and her posture said to look "like everyone's first wife standing outside a probate court." As one Fox News commentator put it, "When Hillary Clinton speaks, men hear, Take out the garbage." Rush Limbaugh, who has no qualms about subjecting audiences to the spectacle of his own bloated physique, asked his listeners, "Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?" Perhaps most damaging of all to her electoral prospects, very early on Clinton was deemed "unlikable." Although other factors also account for that dislike, much of the venom she elicits ("Iron my shirt," "How do we beat the bitch?") is clearly gender-specific.

Watching the brass ring of the presidency slip out of Clinton's grasp as she is buffeted by this torrent of misogyny, women—white women, that is, and mainstream feminists especially—have rallied to her defense. On January 8, after Barack Obama beat Clinton in the Iowa caucuses, Gloria Steinem published a *New York Times* op-ed titled "Women Are Never Front-Runners." "Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House," Steinem wrote. Next came Clinton's famous "misting-over moment" in New Hampshire in response to a question from a woman about the stress of modern campaigning. For that display of emotion, Clinton was derided, on the one hand, as calculating and chameleonlike—"It could be that big girls don't cry…but it could be that if they do they win," said Chris Matthews—and, on the other, as lacking "strength and resolve," as her Democratic rival John Edwards put it, in a jab at the perennial Achilles' heel of women candidates. Riding a wave of female sympathy, Clinton won New Hampshire in what was dubbed an "anti–Chris Matthews vote."

Thus, feminist opposition to the sexist treatment of Hillary Clinton has morphed into support for the candidate herself. In February Robin Morgan published a reprise of her famous 1970 essay "Goodbye to All That," exhorting women to embrace Clinton as a protest against "sociopathic woman-hating." In the *Los Angeles Times*, Leslie Bennetts, author of *The Feminine Mistake*, wrote of older female voters fed up with the media's dismissive treatment of Clinton: "There are signs the slumbering beast may be waking up—and she's not in a happy mood." A recent *New York* magazine article titled "The Feminist Reawakening: Hillary Clinton and the Fourth Wave" described how "it isn't just the 'hot flash cohort'…that broke for Clinton. Women in their thirties and forties—at once discomfited and galvanized by the sexist tenor of the media cover-

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age, by the nastiness of the watercooler talk in the office, by the realization that the once-foregone conclusion of Clinton-as-president might never come to be—did too."

The sexist attacks on Clinton are outrageous and deplorable, but there's reason to be concerned about her becoming the vehicle for a feminist reawakening. For one thing, feminist sympathy for her has begotten an "oppression sweepstakes" in which a number of her prominent supporters, dismayed at her upstaging by Obama, have declared a contest between racial and gender bias and named sexism the greater scourge. This maneuver is not only unhelpful for coalition-building but obstructs understanding of how sexism and racism have played out in this election in different (and interrelated) ways.

Yet what is most troubling—and what has the most serious implications for the feminist movement—is that the Clinton campaign has used her rival's race against him. In the name of demonstrating her superior "electability," she and her surrogates have invoked the racist and sexist playbook of the right—in which swaggering macho cowboys are entrusted to defend the country—seeking to define Obama as too black, too foreign, too different to be President at a moment of high anxiety about national security. This subtly but distinctly racialized political strategy did not create the media feeding frenzy around the Rev. Jeremiah Wright that is now weighing Obama down, but it has positioned Clinton to take advantage of the opportunities the controversy has presented. And the Clinton campaign's use of this strategy has many nonwhite and nonmainstream feminists crying foul.

The sexist attacks on Clinton are deplorable, but there's reason to be concerned about her becoming the vehicle for a feminist reawakening.

While 2008 was never going to be a "postracial" campaign, the early racially tinged skirmishes between the Clinton and Obama camps seemed containable. There were references by Clinton campaign officials to Obama's admission of past drug use; the tit-for-tat over Clinton's tone-deaf but historically accurate statement that Martin Luther King needed Lyndon Johnson for his civil rights dreams to be realized; and insinuations that Obama is a token, unqualified, overreaching—that he's all pretty words, "fairy tales" and no action.

From the point of view of Obama's supporters, the edge was taken off some of these conflicts by the mere fact of his stunning electoral success, built as it was on significant white support. Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton and an Obama volunteer, recalls that for black Americans "Iowa was an astonishing moment—watching Barack win the caucus felt like Reconstruction. There was something powerful about feeling as though you were a full citizen." In democracy, Harris-Lacewell explains, "the ruled and rulers are supposed to be the same people. The idea that black folks could be engaged in the process of being rulers over not just black folks but over the nation as a whole struck me as very powerful."

Soon enough, however, that powerful idea came under attack.

"More than any single thing, that moment with Bill Clinton in South Carolina represents the rupture that was coming," says Harris-Lacewell. The moment occurred in late January, when the former President compared Obama's landslide win, in which he received a major boost from African-American voters, to Jesse Jackson's victories there in 1984 and 1988. Because the former President offered the comparison unprompted, in response to a question that had nothing to do with Jackson or race, the statement was widely read as chalking up Obama's win to his blackness alone and thus attempting to marginalize him as a doomed minority candidate with limited appeal. Obama was now "the black candidate," in the words of one Clinton strategist quoted by the AP.

By March, multiple videos of Wright, Obama's former pastor, had popped up on YouTube and had begun to play on an endless loop in the right-wing media. "God damn America for treating your citizens as less than human," Wright inveighed, reciting a litany of racial complaints. And he said in his sermon immediately following 9/11, "America's chickens are coming home to roost."

According to Smith College professor Paula Giddings, author of a new biography of Ida B. Wells, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions and the Campaign Against Lynching*, Wright's angry invocation of race and nation tapped into a reservoir of doubt about the very Americanness of African-Americans. "American citizenship has always been racialized as white. Who is a true American? Are African-Americans true Americans? That has been the question," she says.

In Obama's case—given his mixed-race lineage, his Kenyan father, his experiences growing up in Indonesia, his middle name (Hussein)—questions about his devotion to America carry a special potency, as xenophobia mingles with racism to create a poisonous brew. The toxicity is further heightened in this post-9/11 atmosphere, in which an image of Obama in Somali dress is understood as a slur and e-mails claiming that he is a "secret Muslim" schooled in a madrassa spread virally, along with rumors that he took the oath of office on a Koran. The madrassa and Koran canards have been thoroughly debunked, but still they persist—and few have been willing to stand up and say, So what if he was a Muslim? For her part, Clinton, asked on *60 Minutes* whether Obama was a Muslim, said, "There is nothing to base that on, as far as I know."

Giddings calls the Wright association a "litmus test" that Obama must pass, saying, "It will be interesting to see if a man of color, a man who's cosmopolitan, can be the quintessential symbol of America" as its President.

Obama initially responded to that challenge with his speech in Philadelphia on March 18. While condemning Wright's words, he placed them in a historical context of racial oppression and said, "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community." (More recently, of course, Obama did renounce him.) But in the Philadelphia speech, called "A More

Betsy Reed is executive editor of The Nation.

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Perfect Union," Obama also outlined a racially universal definition of American citizenship and affirmed his commitment to represent all Americans as President. "I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction."

A mere three days after Obama spoke those words, Bill Clinton made this statement in North Carolina about a potential Clinton-McCain general election matchup: "I think it'd be a great thing if we had an election year where you had two people who loved this country and were devoted to the interest of this country. And people could actually ask themselves who is right on these issues, instead of all this other stuff that always seems to intrude itself on our politics." Whether or not this statement constituted McCarthyism, as one Obama surrogate alleged and as Clinton supporters vigorously denied, the timing of the remark made its meaning quite clear: controversies relating to Obama's race render him less fit than either Hillary or McCain to run for president as a patriotic American. A couple of weeks later, *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen went so far as to call on Obama to make another speech, modeled after John F. Kennedy's declaration in 1960 that, despite his Catholicism, he would respect the separation of church and state as President—as though Obama's blackness were a sign of allegiance to some entity, like the Vatican, other than the United States of America.

In the debates, Clinton has increasingly deployed issues of race and patriotism as a wedge strategy against her opponent.

In the Democratic debates, enabled by the moderators, Hillary Clinton has increasingly deployed issues of race and patriotism as a wedge strategy against her opponent. First, in the debate in Cleveland on February 26, she pressed Obama not only to denounce but to reject Louis Farrakhan—to whom he was spuriously linked through Reverend Wright, who had taken a trip with the black nationalist leader in the 1980s. In style as well as content, that attack was a harbinger of things to come. In the most recent debate, ABC's George Stephanopolous and Charles Gibson peppered Obama with questions such as, "Do you believe [Wright] is as patriotic as you are?" and, regarding former Weatherman Bill Ayers, a Chicago neighbor and Obama supporter, "Can you explain that relationship for the voters and explain to Democrats why it won't be a problem?" Time after time, Clinton picked up the line and ran with it. "You know, these are problems, and they raise questions in people's minds. And so this is a legitimate area…for people to be exploring and trying to find answers," she said, seeming to abandon her argument that these issues are fair game now only because they will be raised by Republicans later and thus are relevant to an evaluation of Obama's electability.

The Wright, Farrakhan and Ayers controversies have been fueled by a craven media, and ABC's performance in the debate has rightly been condemned. But given that Clinton is the one who is running for President and who purports to represent liberal ideals, her complicity in such attempts to establish guilt by association is far more troubling. While she has dealt gingerly with the matter of Wright in the wake of his recent appearance at the National Press Club—accusing Republicans of politicizing the issue—she also took pains to remind reporters that she "would not have stayed in that church under those circumstances."

It's disappointing, to say the least, to see the first viable female contender for the presidency participate in attacks on her black opponent's patriotism, which exploit an anxious climate around national security that gives white men an edge both over women and people of color—who tend to be viewed, respectively, as weak and potentially traitorous. Says Paula Giddings, "This idea of nationalism and patriotism pulling at everyone has demanded hypermasculine men, more like McCain than the feline Obama, and demanded women whose role is to be maternal more than anything else."

For Hillary Clinton, the gendered terrain of post-9/11 national security politics has been treacherous indeed. As Elizabeth Drew observed in *The New York Review of Books*, Clinton took steps in the Senate, like joining the Armed Services Committee, "to protect herself from the sexist notion that a woman might be soft on national security." As a 2002 study by the White House Project, a women's leadership group, found, "Women candidates start out with a serious disadvantage—voters tend to view women as less effective and tough. Recent events of war, terrorism, and recession have only…increased the salience of these dimensions." Clinton has been quite successful in allaying these concerns, although she faces a Catch-22: her reputed toughness and ruthlessness have helped ratchet up her high negatives. The White House Project study found that a woman candidate faces a unique tension between the need to show herself "in a light that is personally appealing, while also showing that she has the kind of strength needed for the job she is seeking."

Of course, Clinton's decision to play the hawk may have had other motivations. Perhaps she really believed that voting to authorize the war in Iraq was the right thing to do (which is, arguably, even more worrying). But her posture in this campaign—threatening to "totally obliterate" Iran after being asked how she would respond in the highly improbable event of an Iranian nuclear strike against Israel, for example—has at least something to do with a desire to compete on a macho foreign policy playing field. It's the woman in this Democratic primary race who has the cowboy swagger: the nationalist and militaristic rhetoric, the whiskey-swilling photo-ops, the gotcha attacks for perceived insults to a working-class electorate (as in "Bittergate") that is usually depicted as white and male.

Clinton has, to be sure, faced a raw misogyny that has been more out in the open than the racial attacks on Obama have been. But while sexism may be more casually accepted, racism, which is often coded, is more insidious and trickier to confront. Clinton's response to "Iron my shirt" was immediate and

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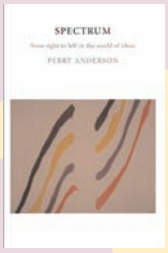

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straightforward: "Oh, the remnants of sexism, alive and well." Says Kimberlé Crenshaw, law professor at Columbia and UCLA and executive director of the African American Policy Forum, "While sexism can be denounced more directly, that doesn't mean it's worse. Things that are racist have yet to be labeled and understood as such."

While on occasion Obama's campaign has complained of racial slights, Obama himself has avoided raising the charge directly. Even so, Clinton supporters make the twisted claim that it is Obama who has racialized the campaign. "While promoting Obama as a 'post-racial' figure, his campaign has purposefully polluted the contest with a new strain of what historically has been the most toxic poison in American politics," wrote Sean Wilentz in *The New Republic* in an article titled "Race Man." Bill Clinton recently groused that the Obama camp, in the controversy over his Jackson remark, "played the race card on me."

As for the way the Clinton campaign has dealt with race, Crenshaw says, "It started with a small drumbeat, but as the campaign has proceeded, as Hillary has taken part in things, more people are really seeing this as a 'line in the sand' kind of moment."

Among the black feminists interviewed for this article, reactions to the declarations of sexism's greater toll by Clinton supporters—and their demand that all women back their candidate out of gender solidarity, regardless of the broader politics of the campaign—ran the gamut from astonishment to dismay to fury. Patricia Hill Collins, a sociology professor at the University of Maryland and author of *Black Feminist Thought*, recalls how, before they were reduced to their race or gender, the candidates were not seen solely through the prism of identity, and many Democrats were thrilled with the choices before them. But of the present, she says, "It is such a distressing, ugly period. Clinton has manipulated ideas about race, but Obama has not manipulated similar ideas about gender." This has exacerbated longstanding racial tensions within the women's movement, Collins notes, and is likely to alienate young black women who might otherwise have been receptive to feminism. "We had made progress in getting younger black women to see that gender does matter in their lives. Now they are going to ask, What kind of white woman is Hillary Clinton?"

The sense of progress unraveling is profound. "What happened to the perspective that the failures of feminism lay in pandering to racism, to everyone nodding that these were fatal mistakes—how is it that all that could be jettisoned?" asks Crenshaw, who co-wrote a piece with Eve Ensler on the Huffington Post called "Feminist Ultimatums: Not in Our Name." Crenshaw says that, appalled as she is by the sexism toward Clinton, she found herself stunned by some of the arguments pro-Hillary feminists were making. "There is a myopic focus on the aspiration of having a woman in the White House—perhaps not *any* woman, but it seems to be pretty much enough that she be a Democratic woman." This stance, says Crenshaw, "is really a betrayal."

Frances Kissling, the former president of Catholics for a Free Choice, attributes this go-for-broke attitude to the mindset of corporate feminism. "There's a way in which feminists who have been seriously engaged in electoral politics for a long time, the institutional DC feminist leadership, they are just with Hillary Clinton come hell or high water. I think they have accepted, as she has accepted, a similar career trajectory. They are not uncomfortable with what has gone on in the campaign, because they see electoral campaigns as mere instruments for getting elected. This is just the way it is. We have to get elected."

The implications of all this for the future of feminism depend significantly on the outcome of the primary, says Kissling. "If Clinton wins, the older-line women's movement will continue; it will be a continuation of power for them. If she doesn't win, it will be a death knell for those people. And that may be a good thing—that a younger generation will start to take over."

Many younger women, indeed, have responded to the admonishments of their pro-Hillary second-wave elders by articulating a sophisticated political orientation that includes feminism but is not confined to it. They may support Obama, but they still abhor the sexism Clinton has faced. And they detect—and reject—a tinge of sexism among male peers who have developed man-crushes on the dashing senator from Illinois. "Even while they voice dismay over the retro tone of the pro-Clinton feminist whine, a growing number of young women are struggling to describe a gut conviction that there is something dark and funky, and probably not so female-friendly, running below the frantic fanaticism of their Obama-loving compatriots," wrote Rebecca Traister in *Salon*.

> 'While sexism can be denounced more directly, things that are racist have yet to be labeled and understood as such.' —Kimberlé Crenshaw

It's not just young feminists who have taken such a nuanced view. Calling themselves Feminists for Peace and Obama, 1,500 prominent progressive feminists—including Kissling, Barbara Ehrenreich and this magazine's Katha Pollitt—signed on to a statement endorsing him and disavowing Clinton's militaristic politics. "Issues of war and peace are also part of a feminist agenda," they declared.

In some sense, this is a clarifying moment as well as a wrenching one. For so many years, feminists have been engaged in a pushback against the right that has obscured some of the real and important differences among them. "Today you see things you might not have seen. It's clearer now about where the lines are between corporate feminism and more grassroots, global feminism," says Crenshaw. Women who identify with the latter movement are saying, as she puts it, "'Wait a minute, that's not the banner we are marching under!'"

Feminist Obama supporters of all ages and hues, meanwhile, are hoping that he comes out of this bruising primary with his style of politics intact. While he calls it "a new kind of politics," Clinton and Obama are actually very similar in

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their records and agendas (which is perhaps why this contest has fixated so obsessively on their gender and race). But in his rhetoric and his stance toward the world outside our borders, Obama does appear to offer a way out of the testosterone-addled GOP framework. As he said after losing Pennsylvania, "We can be a party that thinks the only way to look tough on national security is to talk, and act, and vote like George Bush and John McCain. We can use fear as a tactic and the threat of terrorism to scare up votes. Or we can decide that real strength is asking the tough questions before we send our troops to fight."

As comedian Chris Rock quipped, Bush "fucked up so bad that he's made it hard for a white man to run for President." Rock spoke too soon: many are hungry for a shift, but the country needs the right push to get there. Unfortunately, from Hillary Clinton, it's getting a shove in the wrong direction. ■

The New Geopolitics of Energy

The Pentagon has now placed resource competition at the center of its strategic planning.

By MICHAEL T. KLARE

While the day-to-day focus of US military planning remains Iraq and Afghanistan, American strategists are increasingly looking beyond these two conflicts to envision the global combat environment of the emerging period—and the world they see is one where the struggle over vital resources, rather than ideology or balance-of-power politics, dominates the martial landscape. Believing that the United States must reconfigure its doctrines and forces in order to prevail in such an environment, senior officials have taken steps to enhance strategic planning and combat capabilities. Although little of this has reached the public domain, there have been a number of key indicators.

Since 2006 the Defense Department, in its annual report *Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, has equated competition over resources with conflict over Taiwan as a potential spark for a US war with China. Preparation for a clash over Taiwan remains "an important driver" of China's military modernization, the 2008 edition noted, but "analysis of China's military acquisitions and strategic thinking suggests Beijing is also developing capabilities for use in other contingencies, such as conflict over resources." The report went on to suggest that the Chinese are planning to enhance their capacity for "power projection" in areas that provide them with critical raw materials, especially fossil fuels, and that such efforts would pose a significant threat to America's security interests.

The Pentagon is also requesting funds this year for the establishment of the Africa Command (Africom), the first overseas joint command to be formed since 1983, when President Reagan created the Central Command (Centcom) to guard Persian Gulf oil. Supposedly, the new organization will focus its efforts on humanitarian aid and the "war on terror." But in a presentation delivered at the National Defense University in February, Africom's deputy commander, Vice Adm. Robert Moeller, said, "Africa holds growing geostrategic importance" to the United States—with oil a key factor in this equation—and that among the key challenges to US strategic interests in the region is China's "Growing Influence in Africa."

AP/LOCKHEED MARTIN

The Navy's first littoral combat ship, under construction in 2006 in Marinette, Wisconsin

Russia, too, is being viewed through the lens of global resource competition. Although Russia, unlike the United States and China, does not need to import oil and natural gas to satisfy its domestic requirements, it seeks to dominate the transportation of energy, especially to Europe. This has alarmed senior White House officials, who resent restoration of Russia's great-power status and fear that its growing control over the distribution of oil and gas in Eurasia will undercut America's influence in the region. In response to the Russian energy drive, the Bush Administration is undertaking countermoves. "I do intend to appoint…a special energy coordinator who could especially spend time on the Central Asian and Caspian region," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice informed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February. "It is a really important part of diplomacy." A key job of the coordinator, she suggested, would be to encourage the establishment of oil and gas pipelines that bypass Russia, thereby diminishing its control over the regional flow of energy.

Taken together, these and like moves suggest that a momen-

Michael T. Klare, The Nation's defense correspondent, is professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College. His latest book is Rising Power, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy.

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tous shift has occurred. At a time when world supplies of oil, natural gas, uranium and key industrial minerals like copper and cobalt are beginning to shrink and the demand for them is exploding, the major industrial powers are becoming more desperate in their drive to gain control over what remains of the planet's untapped reserves [for more evidence of major shortages in fossil fuels, see Klare, "Beyond the Age of Petroleum," November 12, 2007, and Mark Hertsgaard, "Running on Empty," May 12]. These efforts typically entail intense bidding wars for supplies on international markets—hence the record high prices for all these commodities. But they also take military form, as arms transfers and the deployment of overseas missions and bases. It is to bolster America's advantage—and to counter similar moves by China and other resource competitors—that the Pentagon has placed resource competition at the center of its strategic planning.

Alfred Thayer Mahan Revisited

This is not the first time that American strategists have placed a high priority on the global struggle over vital resources. At the end of the nineteenth century a bold and outspoken group of military thinkers, led by naval historian and Naval War College president Alfred Thayer Mahan and his protégé, then–Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, campaigned for a strong American Navy and the acquisition of colonies to ensure access to overseas markets and raw materials. Eventually, their views helped generate public support for the Spanish-American War and, upon its conclusion, the establishment of a Caribbean and Pacific empire by the United States.

During the cold war, ideology reigned supreme as containment of the USSR and the defeat of Communism were the overriding objectives of American strategy. But even then, resource considerations were not entirely neglected. The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 and the Carter Doctrine of 1980, though couched in the standard anti-Soviet rhetoric of the day, were principally intended to ensure continued US access to the Persian Gulf's prolific oil reserves. And when President Carter established the nucleus of Centcom in 1980, its primary responsibility was protection of the Persian Gulf oil flow—not containment of the Soviet Union.

After the cold war, the first President Bush tried, and failed, to establish a global coalition of like-minded states—a "new world order"—that would maintain global stability and allow Western corporate interests (American firms foremost among them) to extend their reach across the planet. This approach, in watered-down form, was subsequently embraced by President Clinton. But 9/11 and the current Administration's relentless campaign against "rogue states," notably Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Iran, has reinjected an ideological element into US strategic planning. As George W. Bush tells it, the "war on terror" and rogue states are the contemporary equivalents of earlier ideological struggles against Fascism and Communism. Examine the issues closely, however, and it is impossible to disentangle the problem of Middle Eastern terrorism or the challenge posed by Iraq and Iran from the history of Western oil extraction in those regions.

Islamic extremism of the sort propagated by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda has many roots, but one of its major claims is that the Western assault on and occupation of Islamic lands—and the resulting defilement of Muslim peoples and cultures—has been driven by the West's craving for Middle Eastern oil. "Remember too that the biggest reason for our enemies' control over our lands is to steal our oil," bin Laden told his sympathizers in a December 2004 audiotaped address. "So give everything you can to stop the greatest theft of oil in history."

Likewise, the US conflict with Iraq and Iran has largely been shaped by the fundamental tenet of the Carter Doctrine: that the United States will not permit the emergence of a hostile power that might gain control over the flow of Persian Gulf oil and thus—in Vice President Cheney's words—"be able to dictate the future of worldwide energy policy." The fact that these countries might be seeking weapons of mass destruction only complicates the task of neutralizing the threat they pose, but it does not alter the underlying strategic logic.

Concern over the safety of vital resource supplies has, therefore, been a central feature of strategic planning for a long time. But the attention now devoted to this issue represents a qualitative shift in US thinking, matched only by the imperial impulses that led to the Spanish-American War a century ago. This time, however, the shift is driven not by an optimistic faith in America's capacity to dominate the world economy but by a largely pessimistic outlook regarding the future availability of vital resources and the intense competition over them waged by China and other rising economic dynamos. Faced with these dual challenges, Pentagon strategists believe that ensuring US primacy in the global resource struggle must be the top priority of American military policy.

Back to the Future

In line with this new outlook, fresh emphasis is being placed on the global role of the Navy. Using language that would sound surprisingly familiar to Alfred Mahan and the first President Roosevelt, the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard unveiled *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* in October; it emphasizes America's need to dominate the oceans and guard the vital sea lanes that connect this country to its overseas markets and resource supplies:

> Over the past four decades, total sea borne trade has more than quadrupled: 90% of world trade and two-thirds of its petroleum are transported by sea. The sea-lanes and supporting shore infrastructure are the lifelines of the modern global economy.… Heightened popular expectations and increased competition for resources, coupled with scarcity, may encourage nations to exert wider claims of sovereignty over greater expanses of ocean, waterways, and natural resources—potentially resulting in conflict.

To address this danger, the Defense Department has undertaken a massive modernization of the combat fleet, entailing the design and procurement of new aircraft carriers, destroyers, cruisers, submarines and a new type of "littoral combat" (coastal warfare) ship—an endeavor that could take decades to complete and consume hundreds of billions of dollars. Elements of this plan were unveiled by President Bush and Defense Secretary Gates in the budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2009, submitted in February. Among the big-ticket items highlighted in the shipbuilding budget are:

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§ $4.2 billion for the lead ship of a new generation of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers;

§ $3.2 billion for a third Zumwalt class missile destroyer; these warships with advanced stealth capabilities will also serve as a "testbed" for a new class of missile cruisers, the CG(X);

§ $1.3 billion for the first two littoral combat ships;

§ $3.6 billion for another Virginia class submarine, the world's most advanced undersea combat vessel in production.

Proposed shipbuilding programs will cost $16.9 billion in FY 2009, on top of $24.6 billion voted in FY 2007 and FY 2008.

The Navy's new strategic outlook is reflected not only in the procurement of new vessels but also in the disposition of existing ones. Until recently most naval assets were concentrated in the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Northwest Pacific in support of American forces assigned to NATO and the defense pacts with South Korea and Japan. These ties still figure prominently in strategic calculations, but ever-increasing weight is placed on the protection of vital trade links in the Persian Gulf, the Southwest Pacific and the Gulf of Guinea (close to Africa's major oil producers). In 2003, for example, the head of the US European Command declared that the aircraft carrier battle groups under his command would be spending fewer months in the Mediterranean and "half their time going down the west coast of Africa."

A similar outlook is guiding the realignment of overseas bases, which has been under way for the past several years. When the Bush Administration came into office, most major bases were in Western Europe, Japan or South Korea. Under the prodding of then–Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, however, the Pentagon began to relocate forces from the outer fringes of Eurasia to its central and southern regions—especially East-Central Europe, Central Asia and Southwest Asia—as well as to North and Central Africa. True, these areas are home to Al Qaeda and the Middle Eastern "rogue states"—but they also contain 80 percent or more of the world's oil and natural gas, as well as reserves of uranium, copper, cobalt and other critical industrial materials. And, as noted, it is impossible to separate the one from the other in US strategic calculations.

A case in point is the US plan to maintain a basing infrastructure to support combat operations in the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia. American ties with states in this area were established several years before 9/11, to protect the flow of Caspian Sea oil to the West. Believing that the Caspian basin could prove a valuable new source of oil and natural gas, President Clinton worked assiduously to open the doors to US involvement in the area's energy production; aware also of the endemic ethnic antagonisms in the region, he sought to bolster the military capabilities of friendly local powers and to prepare for possible intervention by American forces. President Bush later built on these efforts, increasing the flow of US military aid and establishing bases in the Central Asian republics.

A corresponding mix of priorities governs the Pentagon's plans to retain a constellation of "enduring" bases in Iraq. Many of these installations will no doubt be used to support continuing operations against insurgent forces, for intelligence activities or for the training of Iraqi army and police units. Even if all US combat troops are withdrawn in accordance with plans announced by senators Clinton and Obama, some of these bases will probably be retained for the training activities they say will continue. At least some bases, moreover, are specifically earmarked for the protection of Iraqi oil exports. In 2007, for example, the Navy revealed that it had established a command-and-control facility atop an offshore Iraqi oil terminal in the Persian Gulf to oversee the protection of vital terminals.

A Global Struggle

No other major power is capable of matching the United States when it comes to the global deployment of military power in the pursuit or protection of vital raw materials. Nevertheless, other powers are beginning to challenge this country in various ways. In particular, China and Russia are providing arms to oil and gas producers in the developing world and beginning to enhance their military capacity in key energy-producing areas.

China's drive to gain access to foreign supplies is most evident in Africa, where Beijing has established ties with the oil-producing governments of Algeria, Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria and Sudan. China has also sought access to Africa's abundant mineral supplies, pursuing copper in Zambia and Congo, chromium in Zimbabwe and a range of minerals in South Africa. In each case the Chinese have wooed suppliers through vigorous diplomacy, offers of development assistance and low-interest loans, high-visibility cultural projects—and, in many cases, arms. China is now a major supplier of basic combat gear to many of these countries and is especially known for its weapons sales to Sudan—arms that reportedly have been used by government forces in attacks on civilian communities in Darfur. Moreover, like the United States, China has supplemented its arms transfers with military-support agreements, leading to a steady buildup of Chinese instructors, advisers and technicians, who now compete with their US counterparts for the loyalty of African military officers.

Much the same process is under way in Central Asia, where China and Russia cooperate under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to provide arms and technical assistance to the military forces of the Central Asian "stans"—again competing with the United States to win the loyalty of local military elites. In the 1990s Russia was too preoccupied with Chechnya to pay much attention to this area, and China was likewise consumed with other priorities, so Washington enjoyed a temporary advantage; in the past five years, however, Moscow and Beijing have made concerted efforts to gain influence in the region. The result has been a far more competitive geopolitical environment, with Russia and China, linked through the SCO, gaining ground in their drive to diminish US influence.

A clear expression of this drive was the military exercise the SCO conducted last summer, the first of its kind to feature participation by all member states. The maneuvers involved some 6,500 personnel from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and took place in Russia and China. Aside from its symbolic significance, the exercise was indicative of China's and Russia's efforts to enhance their capabilities, placing a heavy emphasis on long-range assault forces. For the first time, a contingent of Chinese airborne troops were deployed outside Chinese terri-

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tory, a clear sign of Beijing's growing assertiveness.

To ensure that the intended message of these exercises did not go unnoticed, the presidents of China and Russia used the occasion of an accompanying SCO summit in Kyrgyzstan to warn the United States (though not by name) against meddling in Central Asian affairs. In calling for a "multipolar" world, for example, Vladimir Putin declared that "any attempts to solve global and regional problems unilaterally are hopeless." For his part, Hu Jintao noted, "The SCO nations have a clear understanding of the threats faced by the region and thus must ensure their security themselves."

These and other efforts by Russia and China, combined with stepped-up US military aid to states in the region, are part of a larger, though often hidden, struggle to control the flow of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea basin to markets in Europe and Asia. And this struggle, in turn, is but part of a global struggle over energy.

The great risk is that this struggle will someday breach the boundaries of economic and diplomatic competition and enter the military realm. This will not be because any of the states involved make a deliberate decision to provoke a conflict with a competitor—the leaders of all these countries know that the price of violence is far too high to pay for any conceivable return. The problem, instead, is that all are engaging in behaviors that make the outbreak of inadvertent escalation ever more likely. These include, for example, the deployment of growing numbers of American, Russian and Chinese military instructors and advisers in areas of instability where there is every risk that these outsiders will someday be caught up in local conflicts on opposite sides.

The increasingly militarized competition among the United States, Russia and China for scarce resources threatens to turn violent.

This risk is made all the greater because intensified production of oil, natural gas, uranium and minerals is itself a source of instability, acting as a magnet for arms deliveries and outside intervention. The nations involved are largely poor, so whoever controls the resources controls the one sure source of abundant wealth. This is an invitation for the monopolization of power by greedy elites who use control over military and police to suppress rivals. The result, more often than not, is a wealthy strata of crony capitalists kept in power by brutal security forces and surrounded by disaffected and impoverished masses, often belonging to a different ethnic group—a recipe for unrest and insurgency. This is the situation today in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, in Darfur and southern Sudan, in the uranium-producing areas of Niger, in Zimbabwe, in the Cabinda province of Angola (where most of that country's oil lies) and in numerous other areas suffering from what's been called the "resource curse."

The danger, of course, is that the great powers will be sucked into these internal conflicts. This is not a far-fetched scenario; the United States, Russia and China are already providing arms and military-support services to factions in many of these disputes. The United States is arming government forces in Nigeria and Angola, China is aiding government forces in Sudan and Zimbabwe, and so on. An even more dangerous situation prevails in Georgia, where the United States is backing the pro-Western government of President Mikhail Saakashvili with arms and military support while Russia is backing the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia plays an important strategic role for both countries because it harbors the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, a US-backed conduit carrying Caspian Sea oil to markets in the West. There are US and Russian military advisers/instructors in both areas, in some cases within visual range of each other. It is not difficult, therefore, to conjure up scenarios in which a future blow-up between Georgian and separatist forces could lead, willy-nilly, to a clash between American and Russian soldiers, sparking a much greater crisis.

It is essential that America reverse the militarization of its dependence on imported energy and ease geopolitical competition with China and Russia over control of foreign resources. Because this would require greater investment in energy alternatives, it would also lead to an improved energy economy at home (with lower prices in the long run) and a better chance at overcoming global warming.

Any strategy aimed at reducing reliance on imported energy, especially oil, must include a huge increase in spending on alternative fuels, especially renewable sources of energy (solar and wind), second-generation biofuels (those made from nonedible plant matter), coal gasification with carbon capture and burial (so that no carbon dioxide escapes into the atmosphere to heat the planet) and hydrogen fuel cells, along with high-speed rail, public transit and other advanced transportation systems. The science and technology for these advances is already largely in place, but the funding to move them from the lab or pilot-project stage to full-scale development is not. The challenge, then, is to assemble the many billions—even trillions—of dollars that will be needed.

The principal obstacle to this herculean task is the very reason for its necessity in the first place: massive spending on the military dimensions of overseas resource competition. I estimate that it costs approximately $100 billion to $150 billion per year to enforce the Carter Doctrine, not including the war in Iraq. Extending that doctrine to the Caspian Sea basin and Africa will add billions. A new cold war with China, with an accompanying naval arms race, will require trillions in additional military expenditures over the next few decades. This is sheer lunacy: it will not guarantee access to more sources of energy, lower the cost of gasoline at home or discourage China from seeking new energy resources. What it *will* do is sop up all the money we need to develop alternative energy sources and avert the worst effects of global climate change.

And this leads to a final recommendation: rather than engage in militarized competition with China, we should cooperate with Beijing in developing alternative energy sources and more

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Results not typical.

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efficient transportation systems. The arguments in favor of collaboration are overwhelming: together, we are projected to consume 35 percent of the world's oil supply by 2025, most of which will have to be imported from dysfunctional states. If, as is widely predicted, global oil reserves have begun to shrink by then, both of our countries could be locked in a dangerous struggle for dwindling supplies in chronically unstable areas of the world. The costs, in terms of rising military outlays and the inability to invest in more worthwhile social, economic and environmental endeavors, would be staggering. Far better to forswear this sort of competition and work together on the development of advanced petroleum alternatives, super-fuel-efficient vehicles and other energy innovations. Many American and Chinese universities and corporations have already initiated joint ventures of this sort, so it is not hard to envision a much grander regime of cooperation.

As we approach the 2008 elections, two paths lie before us. One leads to greater reliance on imported fuels, increased militarization of our foreign fuel dependency and prolonged struggle with other powers for control over the world's remaining supplies of fossil fuels. The other leads toward diminished reliance on petroleum as a main source of our fuel, the rapid development of energy alternatives, a reduced US military profile abroad and cooperation with China in the development of innovative energy options. Rarely has a policy choice been as stark or as momentous for the future of our country. ■

Letter From Iran

Iranians' attitudes toward the regime range from sullen tolerance to bitter hostility.

by ROBERT DREYFUSS

Across the street from the sprawling shrine to Fatima al-Masumeh, the revered sister of Imam Reza, the eighth Shiite imam, a group of campaign workers on a rooftop are busy unfurling wall-sized election posters for a conservative candidate in Iran's March parliamentary election. We're in downtown Qom, a city of 1 million about 100 miles southwest of Tehran. Qom is Iran's religious capital, the wellspring for a host of fundamentalist clerics who've ruled Iran since 1979, and it is an eerie place. Unlike some other cities in Iran, where urban professionals, merchants and the middle class try to push back against onerous restrictions on freedom of expression and women's dress, there's little evidence of that in Qom. Women are cloaked head to toe in black garments, and turbaned mullahs on motorbikes are a common sight.

Under a brilliant blue sky, mourners are lining up to enter the shrine and pay their respects to Fatima, whose remains are entombed inside an Oz-like green-mirrored vault. Among the mourners, in formation behind a green banner, are a phalanx of grim-faced, muscled militiamen, members of the Basij corps, wearing black T-shirts and black headbands. The Basij is an estimated million-strong volunteer paramilitary force that serves as an adjunct to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and in 2005 the Basijis voted en bloc to help elect hard-line Mahmoud Ahmadinejad president.

I'm standing in the inner courtyard of the shrine, a vast public space surrounded by vaulted enclaves, towering minarets and spectacular entrance halls bedecked in blue, green and gold tiles. With me is Muhammad Legenhausen, 55, a New York–born, ex-Catholic professor of philosophy who converted to Shiism, changed his name from Gary and moved to Iran in the 1980s. Legenhausen tells me he teaches philosophy at four universities and institutions in Qom. At the powerful Imam

Robert Dreyfuss is a Nation *contributing editor.*

ROBERT DREYFUSS

The Dar al-Hadith Research Institute in Qom

Khomeini Education and Research Institute, he also serves as an aide to Ayatollah M.T. Mesbah-Yazdi, who is widely seen as the chief backer of President Ahmadinejad and who has even been mentioned as a possible successor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Iran's next Supreme Leader.

It's true, says Legenhausen, that Mesbah-Yazdi was the power behind Ahmadinejad's 2005 candidacy. "He was concerned that the reformers had opened things up too far," Legenhausen says, with an odd twinkle in his eye, in his distinct New York–accented English. "On that, he agrees with Ahmadinejad 100 percent." But how, I ask, can you work for someone who supports a conference to deny the Jewish Holocaust? "Oh, that!" he says. "When we heard about that, Mesbah-Yazdi and I just rolled our eyes. That was all Ahmadinejad's doing. We said to each other, 'What can you do?'" He shrugs, as if to imply that this was just Ahmadinejad being Ahmadinejad.

To understand where the power in Iran lies—and where the money goes—it's enough to glance at the gleaming new headquarters of the Dar al-Hadith Research Institute in Qom. Astride one of the main approaches to the city, the Dar al-Hadith, which translates roughly into "house of Islamic traditions," is an imposing orange-yellow edifice with blue and green decorative tiles under a yellow tiled dome. It stands in sharp contrast to the dilapidated buildings that crowd the downtowns of many Iranian cities. Inside the Dar, a bustling staff of clerics

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and researchers, working in modernistic surroundings and aided by computers and a vast library, spend their time assembling and reassembling the medieval opinions of Muslim scholars, compiling them into compendiums that are published in Farsi, Urdu and Arabic. It's a labor of love.

In a large, well-appointed conference room, the head of Dar al-Hadith holds forth for visitors. He's an impressive man, nicknamed "the scary ayatollah." Slim and balding, with a gray-flecked beard, Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri wears rimless glasses with thick lenses under a white turban. In the early '80s he was one of Iran's first ministers of intelligence, a post in which he developed a reputation for brutal acts of repression and summary executions. Today he is the head of a major shrine foundation in Tehran and a member of the Assembly of Experts, which selects the Supreme Leader. Surrounded by a dozen staffers, including six mullahs, he says without irony, "Islam is the religion of logic, ethics and justice."

One of his jobs in Iran is to oversee the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that is the duty of all devout Muslims. Under his supervision Iranians visit not only Mecca but Najaf and Karbala, the Shiite holy cities in Iraq. He is frank about Iranian support for the Baghdad regime. "You must be aware that the government in Iraq is a government supported by us," he says. Given that tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visit Iraq each month, in a migration overseen by a former intelligence minister, it's not unlikely that some of them, at least, are on official business.

Reyshahri makes his exit, but later, over a lunch of kabobs, yogurt and rice, I find myself engaged in a vigorous political discussion with one of his aides, a mullah named Mohammad Mahdavi. Portly and grandfatherly, with a white turban, Mahdavi is a well-connected senior cleric, a *hojatolislam* (a rank below ayatollah), who not long ago turned down a job as deputy foreign minister. How, I ask, can Reyshahri talk about justice when the regime sends the Guard onto the campus of Tehran University to throw protesting students out of the dormitory windows to their death? When assassins are sent to hack liberal politicians like Darioush Forouhar and his wife to death in their beds? "There are conspiracies," he says, unfazed. "There are spies. So, of course, sometimes we have to take strong measures against the protesters." He justifies such actions by citing reports that the United States is trying to break up Iran, to provoke separatist movements in Kurdistan, Baluchistan and the oil-rich Arab province of Khuzestan in southwest Iran, though the evidence of such covert US activity is mixed at best.

I ask Mahdavi why the regime doesn't allow reformists, secular parties or the left to organize and run for office freely. "People who go into Parliament must swear allegiance to the Constitution, and that requires that they support Islam. They do not. If they say they do, they are lying. Should we send liars to Parliament?" We send liars to Congress all the time, I reply, and he laughs, adding, "For myself, I would allow all of them to run. Why not? If they ran, well—" He wipes his palms together. You mean they wouldn't get any votes? "Exactly," he replies. "But you must understand. Our people are very religious. If we did that, there would be big protests by the people. They would ask, 'Why are you letting these people run?'"

Ahmadinejad's election was the first step by Iran's hardline clergy to uproot the reform movement in Iran. The other shoe dropped on March 14, when hard-liners consolidated their control in parliamentary elections, ensuring the ultraconservatives near-total control of all three branches of government: the presidency, the judiciary (which is controlled directly by the Supreme Leader) and the Parliament. From the start, the election was rigged in favor of the right. Two thousand candidates were disqualified from running. Liberal and secular parties, and those who don't accept the premise of a clergy-run Islamic Republic, have been banned outright for years. Harsh restrictions were placed on those who did run. And candidates who managed to get approval got the nod so late that they were unable to gain any traction.

'We had such hopes for [reformist President Mohammad] Khatami. But you see what happened. The regime killed everything.'

Not surprisingly, under such conditions many Iranians are not enthusiastic about voting. Although in 2008 overall turnout was 60 percent, in Tehran it was far lower, just 30 percent, and in runoff elections only 26 percent showed up. Many who did go to the polls went only because the regime stamps Iranians' ID cards when they vote, and those who fail to vote can find it impossible to be hired as, say, teachers or other state employees. From dozens of discussions with ordinary Iranians—in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Kashan—it is clear that most Iranians are disenchanted with the clerical regime.

First, though, a word about talking with Iranians. I've come to Iran as a journalist, part of a small delegation from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith peace organization founded in 1914. The delegation is hosted by the Center for Interreligious Dialogue, an Iranian government organization whose staff says that it is "linked to the office of the Supreme Leader." When I engage Iranians by myself, whether through random encounters or in prearranged meetings, people want to talk. When they find out I'm an American, they tell their stories with enthusiasm. But whenever I'm accompanied by a minder, in the form of an official from the Center for Interreligious Dialogue, an oppressive chill descends and people clam up.

In almost every conversation, Iranians' attitudes toward the regime of the mullahs range from sullen tolerance to bitter hostility. In the Tehran bazaar, two young men who sell carpets want to talk politics. "Do you know the mullahs?" one asks. "We hate them. They are stupid." And they both laugh. In Shiraz, the historic and beautiful city of poets in the south, I have dinner with four women and three men, ranging in age from 20 to 40. Mehri, one of the women, is a dentist in her late 30s. Earlier that day, we'd met at Persepolis, where the breathtaking ruins of the palaces of Darius, Xerxes and Cyrus the Great lie sparkling in the intense sunlight, and I'd invited her and her friends for dinner. "We had such hopes for [the previous reformist president, Mohammad] Khatami," says Mehri. "But you see what happened. The regime killed everything.

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Now we don't know what is better to do: do we vote for the reformers, even though we know they can't do anything? Or do we stay home and not vote at all?"

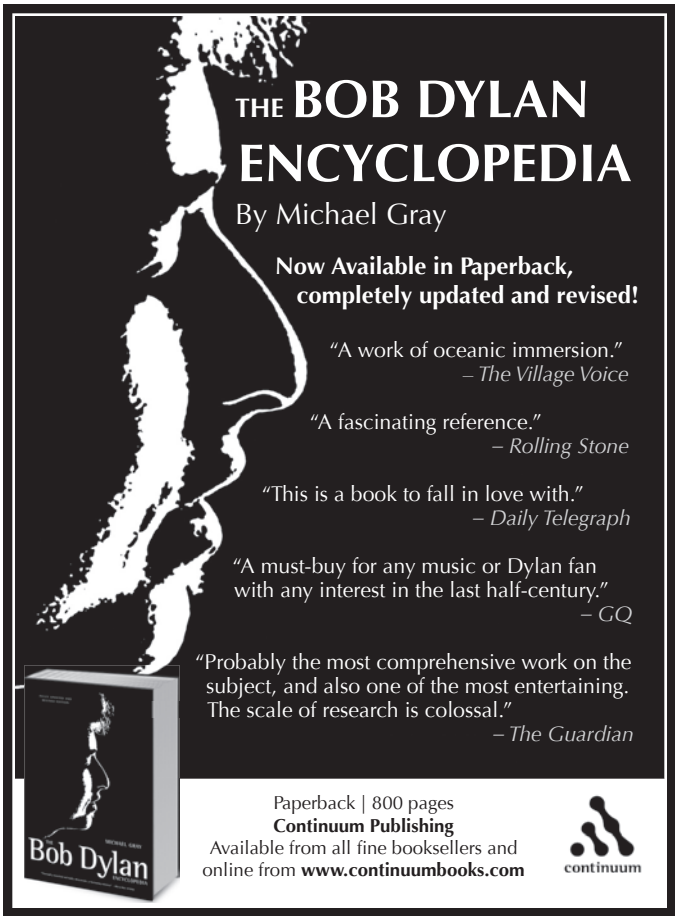
On a hiking trail in the snow-covered mountains north of Tehran, Hirad, a young notary public, complains about how hard it is to get a job and—in a complaint I hear repeatedly—how hard it is to meet women in the face of severe harassment by the morality police. "This regime is terrible," he says. Suddenly he notices the bearded man in a blue blazer who's been assigned to accompany our group this morning. The two men shake hands and exchange greetings, and then Hirad and I walk quickly away. He glances over his shoulder. With contempt, he spits on the ground. "Fucking beard!" he says, lashing out at the symbol of loyalty to the Islamic Republic.

A few days later I have a chance to ask a top Iranian official about public disenchantment with the regime. M. Hossein Saffar-Haramdi, minister of culture and Islamic guidance, has an easy manner and a ready grin, and looks like a carbon copy of Ahmadinejad: wiry, with a short, neatly trimmed beard. It's his job to enforce Islamic discipline on the media, the arts and other forms of public expression. "The solution to the problems of the world," he says earnestly, "is to move closer to religion." A layman and former deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guard, Saffar-Haramdi served for ten years as chief of the guard's political bureau. Asked why he forcibly closes newspapers, he is defiant. "Any press activity that would disturb the fabric of society or create some sort of disruption, the law must be applied," he says. "The press is free, as long as it does not start insulting political personalities and religious beliefs."

Unlike the frown-faced, fire-and-brimstone mullahs cast in the mold of the scowling Ayatollah Khomeini, Mohammad Khatami seems gentle and avuncular, and when he was elected president in 1997 he embodied the hopes of Iranians who longed for a thaw in Iran's frozen politics. But he ran afoul of the hard-liners, including Khamenei, the Guardian Council and the courts, and his efforts at reform were stymied. Conservatives like Mesbah-Yazdi, along with the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij, mobilized against him, and in three successive elections—parliamentary elections in 2004, the presidential election in 2005 (won by Ahmadinejad) and the March parliamentary election—the Islamic rightists won big.

Today, sitting in a high-ceilinged room at the International Center for Dialogue Among Civilizations, which he founded in 1999, Khatami appears relaxed and confident. He's sitting cross-legged in a black turban and black robe, sporting penny loafers, wearing a turquoise ring. I ask him to reflect on his eight years as president, about what went wrong and where to go from here, and he laughs. "That answer calls for a two- or three-hour meeting!" he says. He makes it clear that despite everything, he is either unwilling or unable to challenge the regime directly. "We are reformists," he says. "Reform takes place within the system, not against the system. Once you go outside the system, then it is a revolution you seek." He is willing to work for incremental gains. "The path we have chosen is the right path," he says. "I am not pessimistic."

Khatami hopes for better relations with the United States, but he leaves no doubt that the Bush Administration destroyed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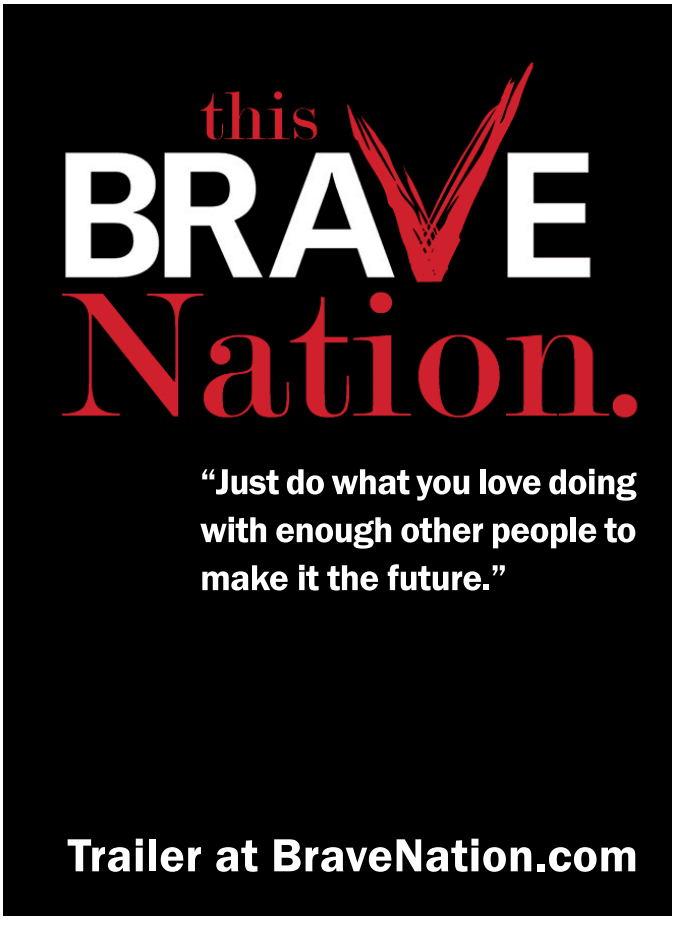

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any possibility of rapprochement. "During my tenure, many steps were taken to eradicate misunderstandings. I believe the Clinton Administration did not object to these efforts. But I am sorry to say that certain forces were opposed. When Bush came into power, everything was turned upside down. When the Iran of the Khatami era is branded as the axis of evil, despite the fact that Iran's cooperation was the most important factor in America's success in Afghanistan [in 2001], these misunderstandings become more powerful."

A few seats away, nodding in agreement, is Sadegh Kharazi, the former deputy foreign minister who is now an aide to Khatami. Five years ago, Kharazi helped write a secret offer to cooperate with the Bush Administration on a broad range of issues, from Israel and terrorism to Iran's nuclear enrichment program, but the offer was rebuffed.

The campus of Iran's foreign ministry, stately and tree-lined, is an oasis amid the noisy, traffic-clogged streets of Tehran. Inside, I meet Ali Akbar Rezaie, the director of the section of the ministry that deals with the United States. "We don't have relations with your government, but ironically we are the busiest department in the ministry," he says. Rezaie oversees a staff of ten people, including six who specialize in American affairs, and he works closely with the ministry's in-house think tank, the Institute for Political and International Studies.

I ask Rezaie about Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's recent comment that he could envision a time when Iran and the United States renew ties. Rezaie says that among Iran's political elite, a debate is raging about whether and how to seek better relations with the United States. "The significance of [Khamenei's] statement is that at a high level the debate is a live one, and it's very important. It's not ideological, and it's not based on imperatives from the top."

But the United States is sending conflicting and contradictory signals, he says, combining bellicose rhetoric and a push for sanctions against Iran with less hostile actions, such as the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which said Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program nearly five years ago. "It's confusing for many of us here," he says. "We don't see honesty from the US side. They are just looking to diminish our power, our role, our influence in the region." Whether the United States seeks a rapprochement with Iran or continues to be hostile, America's goal of hegemony in the Persian Gulf will not alter. "It doesn't matter if you have cooperation or confrontation. In both ways they are trying to diminish us. Confront us or embrace us, it's the same goal."

Over at the think tank, Dr. Sayed Kazem Sajjadpour is worried. They're watching the US election campaign carefully, he says, and they're worried that the White House might escalate tensions with Iran in order to create a climate of confrontation that could benefit John McCain. "We're concerned that the United States will be harsh against Iran in order to facilitate votes for the Republican candidate, who will seek to profit over tension with Iran," he says. "The Republicans are likely to use the issue of Iran to divert attention from other problems." ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

Laguna Woods, Calif.
Don't give me any "Back Talk"! Give me the puzzle every week.
Peggy McGovern

Vienna, Me.
For years, my mate and I have indulged in the weekly after-dinner ritual of searching out two pencils with working erasers and sitting side by side, in bed or before the wood stove, to work the *Nation* crossword puzzle. No matter how devastating the news is, we can count on Frank Lewis to take us where *New York Times* meets Gertrude Stein and to blow the cobwebs from our minds in the process. Don't cut back on the stuff our sanity is made of!
Lee Sharkey

Los Angeles
Don't you know that Frank Lewis's puzzles are the best available anywhere? Why can't you put the new column inside with the rest of them? I want my weekly crossword!
Julie May

Emory, Va.
Not having Frank Lewis greet me from the back page every week is going to be a real bummer. Every Monday I promise myself to solve the puzzle before reading the magazine. Having to alter such a long-standing ritual (I'm 70 and a longtime subscriber) is so distressing to my psyche that I shall doubtless not renew. I did give "Back Talk" a try but found Nicholson Baker to be as uninspiring as campaign ads.
Robert D. Denham

Atlanta
After two decades of reading *The Nation* because of the way it challenges wrong-headed, ill-conceived schemes, I was shocked to find the magazine perpetrating one. Surely "Back Talk" is the magazine equivalent of New Coke. Bring back the puzzle, in print, every week, please.
Mike Knobler

Marquette, Mich.
Talk about your bitter, gun-toting, religious voters—their malaise can in no way measure up to what I felt upon turning to the last page. What, no crypto-puzzle? No reward for dutifully reading every article first, all in eager anticipation of Frank Lewis's latest challenge at the end? I cannot solve the global warming problem, the mortgage crisis, the superdelegate conundrum, but, by God, I can solve the weekly puzzle. Please bring back the one thing over which I feel some control!
Frances O'Neill

Helmetta, N.J.
I've been a loyal subscriber for about fifty years. Today I feel stabbed in the heart by your news that the puzzle is now biweekly. Come on, *Nation*! Biweekly isn't weekly, and on the web isn't in the magazine. Please rescind these obnoxious decisions!
Elaine Shinbrot

We regret the shock we've given our loyal, and revered, puzzle-solvers, who have let us know by phone, fax, e-mail and letter that they are not happy with our decision to run the crossword puzzle every other week. We could have done a better job of announcing the puzzle's change of pace, perhaps posting an early notice on the puzzle page itself. Change isn't easy, but we hope puzzlers will learn to enjoy "Back Talk" and that Frank Lewis, Nation *puzzle-setter since 1947, is enjoying the new pace, too.*

*Send us your ideas for slaking your puzzle thirst. Puzzlers, always resourceful, have already suggested that we put out a compendium of Frank's puzzles (*The Compleat Frank Lewis, *anyone?), that we run "puzzle classics" on the website, that apolitical (or Republican) puzzlers be allowed biweekly subscriptions. What's your idea? —The Editors*

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Books & the Arts.

A Deeper Black

by TA-NEHISI COATES

To say that Barack Obama is our first serious black presidential candidate drastically understates the matter. When Obama greets his political allies, he does not give a simple, firm, businesslike handshake. Instead he offers the sort of dap—a little English in the wrist and a one-armed hug—that black males spend much of their adolescence perfecting. If elected, surely Obama will be the first President to greet foreign dignitaries with a pound. Obama warms up on election morning not by running a three-miler or swimming laps but by shooting hoops. The Illinois senator sports a flawless and ever-fresh Caesar demonstrative of the razorwork native to only one side of the tracks. Think Jay-Z—"I'm not looking at you dudes/I'm looking past you"—not Jay Rockefeller.

Likewise, Obama's wife, Michelle, is not merely a black woman but a black woman bearing the diction of that particular tribe of overachieving South Side Chicago blacks who, as children, were corrected with old adages like "*ain't* is not a word." Reporters have been stunned by her raw wit, by her unwillingness to fawn and gush over her husband. But that's standard procedure in black America, where conflicts stretching back to slave ships have taught women to spurn the Stepford act and view every alleged Lancelot askance.

At campaign events Obama is known to crack himself up—once at a barbershop he began snapping, unprompted, on a customer's alligator shoes. During a speech in South Carolina, to the amusement of himself and a predominantly black crowd, Obama noted that his opponents were trying to "bamboozle" and "hoodwink" the voters. He pulled up after noting that he was "having too much fun." The schooled observer could have seen through the first layer of laughter and beheld the real fun—here is a black man running for President by paraphrasing Malcolm X.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is the author of The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood. *He blogs at www.ta-nehisi.com.*

DOUG CHAYKA

Obama's favorite TV series is *The Wire*. His favorite character is Omar, the coal-black antihero who prowls the streets of West Baltimore toting a shotgun and robbing drug dealers. Of course, there's the matter of Obama's retired pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and his United Church of Christ, which right-wingers have taken to equating with Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, respectively. A few months before the professional babblers began frothing at the mouth over Wright, the Obama campaign got wind that it might have an image problem. Its response? Filming a YouTube spot of what must be one of only five white members praising the church's openness. It's the old "some of my best friends are black" misdirection play, but executed from the left side.

At night the cable talk shows are filled with trifling gibberish that either extols Obama's "postracialism" or cautions him against being branded the "black presidential candidate." Usually it's both. These pronouncements are almost always made by men who would most likely be hard-pressed to recall the last time they sat down to dinner with a black family. Their viewpoints are shaped by focus groups, polls and warmed-over bromides like "defense moms" and "NASCAR dads." I can't think of a group more ill equipped to bear witness to humanity, much less a phenomenon as intricate and complicated as race in America.

A Bound Man
Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win.
By Shelby Steele.
Free Press. 143 pp. $22.

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Meanwhile, African-American voters have broken for Obama in margins that make Hillary Clinton look about as popular in the neighborhood as Rudy Giuliani. In this, the hamfisted and befuddled intellects of the world see the "advantages" of being black: chief among them a mindless mass of zombies willing to stumble into poll booths and press a button for the black guy. But what the African-American Obama voter sees is so much more than just the first black President. Indeed, she sees the blackest man to take the public stage ever. Forget about reparations, welfare and white guilt. Forget about 400 years, forty acres and a mule. Forget about the Confederate flag, marching through Jena and Duke lacrosse. Barack Obama is black in the Zen-like way in which white people are white—without explanation. Without self-consciousness. Without permission.

Whites tend to be interested only in someone's biracial parentage, as if there's credit to be taken.

While we're at it, forget the man himself: the clearest evidence of Obama's blackness is his utter invisibility as a black man to the thinking class. The idea that took root as soon as Obama hit the national stage was that the junior senator from Illinois was not really black because he was raised in Hawaii by a white mother and does not scream about race every five minutes. When Obama made his now famous address to the 2004 Democratic convention, most of the earliest reactions denied the man's very existence. In the wake of his speech, most commentators sounded variations on the same false note. Christopher Buckley, in the *New York Times*, called him "the new Tiger Woods of American politics," while William Saletan, in *Slate*, said, "Obama isn't exactly black."

In all justice, the blindness extended across the races. After the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination was under way, Stanley Crouch asserted that Obama does not "share a heritage with the majority of black Americans," while Debra Dickerson simply stated that Obama wasn't black. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Industrial Complex (CRIC), firmly allied with Hillary, did its best to dislodge Obama from the community he claimed as his own. Last fall, Andrew Young announced his support for Clinton on a local Atlanta news show; he'd probed his (presumably black) political connections in Chicago about Obama and reported that "they don't know anybody around him." Then Young pushed things further, claiming that Bill Clinton is "every bit as black as Barack."

Since its conception in the guilt-wracked minds of slave traders, blackness has repeatedly sucked the light from otherwise intelligent folks, rendering them empty, dim vessels in its presence. But pundits did not simply stop at noting Obama's lack of soul; they went on to charge that their measure was somehow universal, that their pronouncements could be trusted as the Doppler radar of electoral breezes and gusts in the black community.

The result was a flurry of stories, which employed the most preliminary of polls, asserting that Hillary Clinton's roots in the black community would ultimately trump Obama's. The swipe was twofold: it posited a black community wracked by xenophobic suspicion of Obama while putting distance between the obvious complexity of Obama and the assumed simple-mindedness of black people.

In fact, the notion that Barack Obama would be banished because of his ancestry is the sort of unlettered theorizing that presumes black people are just a mirror image of whites. But unlike white Americans, blacks have centuries of experience dealing (sometimes not so kindly) with biracial people in their midst. For African-Americans, the blessing of the one-drop rule is blackness as a big tent. Indeed, the first Barack Obama was Frederick Douglass, a biracial slave and autodidact who throttled his slave breaker, fled to the North, traveled the world as an abolitionist, became an ally of Lincoln and published his poignant memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. For his troubles, Douglass was vilified in his time. Critics of his day asserted that no slave, current or ex, could write so movingly.

Whites, on the other hand, often tend to be interested only in someone's biracial parentage, as if there's some credit to be taken. As Obama has acknowledged, were he a notorious drug lord—no matter his background—there would be no rush to analyze the impact of his biraciality. He would be black. There'd be no other choice.

More recently, actual black people who do not talk for a living have rarely reached for the tool of public banishment. At our roots, there is something cloying about us. Having masqueraded as the great American pariah for all our collective lives, we are quick to flock to the banner of even those who want nothing to do with us. O.J. Simpson, who seemed to spurn his origins at every turn, was suddenly transformed into Malcolm X after he was accused of murder. The idea that a black community wracked by misfortune would reject a handsome, Ivy League–educated civil rights lawyer turned senator turned presidential candidate, who'd married a black woman and made his home on the South Side of Chicago—who actually had a chance to win—is, and was, laughable. The fraud was exposed as soon as South Carolina's exit polls started rolling in.

Here is the lesson of it all: never write a book that can be summed up in a four-minute segment of *Hardball*. Item: Shelby Steele's *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*. Christened "America's foremost black intellectual" by George Will—an unsurpassed authority in these matters—Steele is an artifact of the identity culture wars that plagued the 1980s and '90s. And when charged with analyzing Obama-mania, Steele declines to refit his spectacles for the post-9/11 era and instead reaches for the same rusting frames he's been using for almost two decades. "The post-sixties black identity is essentially a totalitarian identity," he writes. "It wants to be an activist identity; it wants black protest to be built into each black person's sense of self."

What follows is a flat and contemptuous rendering of black America. Steele argues that Obama can't win because blacks will not vote for a man who doesn't yell "white supremacy" whenever he's presented with an open mike. Steele, like his compatriots in the pundit class, isn't one to allow actual people to get in the way of a good argument. Writing on hip-hop, he argues that rappers can never assume the iconic status needed to transcend America's racial divide. This would come as news to Will Smith, the first rapper to win a Grammy and currently the most bankable star in Hollywood. At his roots, Steele lacks the nuance to approach black America not as an idea but as a collection of actual thinking, breathing, contradicting (and self-contradictory) human beings.

This is why so much of what's been said about Barack Obama and African-Americans has been so shockingly wrong. Intellectuals examining Obama are trapped in an ancient dynamic—one that even in its heyday was overstated—in which white and black America are constantly at each other's throats, and agree on nothing. The either/or fallacy is their default setting. ("Assimilation, not blackness, is the road to success," writes Steele.) They were made for a world

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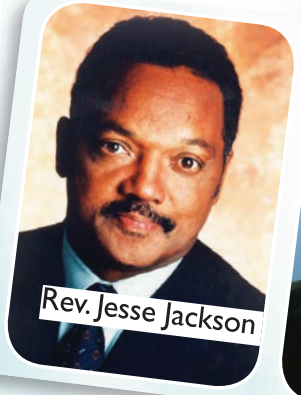
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where affirmative action and welfare reform were campaign issues, not one where universal healthcare and the Iraq War have dominated the debate.

A Bound Man has the whiff of an author who spends very little time around the people he deigns to judge. The book misses the essential power of Barack Obama: that he is revealing for white America the quiet mass of black people who do not spend their days calculating the wages of slavery. Steele can't grasp that blackness, like any cultural force, works quietly and has no desire to be folded into square minds.

Fortunately, it's people, not caricatures, who vote. Thus, if you need any more evidence of Obama's blackness, do nothing more than look at the exit polls where he's dominated most demographics, but especially his own. I would like to say that this is beyond identity politics, but really it isn't. In South Carolina, where Obama's hoarding of the black vote began, Al Sharpton, four years earlier, finished third among black voters. But Sharpton, like his comrades among the CRIC, is weighted to a media-driven definition of blackness defined by opposition. Obama's blackness is at once futuristic and conservative. It recalls the blackness displayed in the novels of Zora Neale Hurston, in which racial paranoia is rendered an afterthought; it also reflects the experience of generations of black people who've encountered white America not as an idea but as a collection of individuals.

Barack Obama hails from Hawaii, but he also has roots in a rather large tribe of African-Americans of recent vintage who are intimately acquainted with both Americas. Some of them were raised in the affluent suburbs by parents who'd known only the rot of inner cities. Many others, like Obama, are the product of interracial unions, privileged to experience both white and black people on intimate levels. They are the ones who spurned the Ivy League for Spelman and Morehouse, or who rebuffed offers from corporate law firms for a return to the streets.

I speak not as one of them. I grew up like most of black America, de facto segregated. When I went off to college at historically black Howard University, blackness was only what I'd seen—row houses with shallow porches, a nasty crossover dribble, hard-driving parents and reverence for Nat Turner. But in my first year at Howard, I met all kinds—math majors fluent in Russian, Marilyn Manson fans, kids straight out of Jack and Jill with fond debutante memories. The first girl I ever fell for had an Indian father and a black mother. She would flash pictures from a photo album of her visits to the subcontinent. The next girl had turned down NYU for Howard and now ran the campus's embattled gay and lesbian club.

What they all shared was a flight from bastions of whiteness, where their names were often shackled to the prefixes "first" and "only." What they shared was a constant flurry of backhanded compliments from their white peers, who, having witnessed them succeed at anything nonathletic (AP English, debate team, smile), would assure them that they "were not really black" or at least "were not like other blacks."

From their unspoken variety, from the Alphas and Omegas, from the buoyant Afros and long dreads, from the night-blacks to those who were almost passing, I drew the great lesson that black was a country, a broad, beautiful America refracted through a smoky lens. For sure, they were different from me. I was young and bursting with militancy and nationalism—among my treasured effects were obscure tomes of proto-Afrocentricity, a burgeoning collection of music, a stack of notebooks crowded with bad poetry of the "Kill Whitey" persuasion. But when we talked, I could feel the shared essence between us.

They were some of the most confident black people I'd ever known. All our lives we'd been raised to see white people as wraiths, as demigods worthy of either complete subservience or unrelenting opposition. This was the logic of our parents, who'd never been free to see whites as fully human and thus to see themselves in the same way. It's also the logic that Shelby Steele thinks still dominates black America. What I learned from the black émigrés who've walked through America, and what I gathered as I aged and walked the land myself, was that the much-ballyhooed powers of white people were neither good nor wicked, just overrated.

This is the blackness of Barack Obama. It is an identity that asserts itself without conscious thought. It has no need of marches and placards. It rejects an opportunistic ignorance of racism but understands that esoteric ramblings about white-skin privilege do not move the discussion further. It does not need to bluster, to scream, to hyperbolize. Obama's blackness is like any other secure marker of identity, subtle and irreducible to a list of demands.

It also lines up perfectly with even those younger blacks who've never ventured beyond the veil but who, minus the shadow of segregation, have concluded that their skin is as worthy as the next man's. This is why all the fuss over how much or how little Obama addresses racism misses the point. Obama mentions white racism about as often as black people actually think about white racism—which is to say rarely.

This is not an endorsement. I came up waving *The Final Call* and convinced that the answer to everything lay in the last words of Frantz Fanon. To which most of my friends would reply, "So, who won the game last night?" Survey the average voter in Harlem, Detroit or West Baltimore, ask her to rank her presidential concerns and see where "reparations" or "abolishing the Confederate flag" compares with, say, "healthcare" or "ending the war." In the wake of Obama's speech on race in Philadelphia, the pundits swooned, marveling specifically at Obama's willingness to say that those who fled inner-city America, who opposed affirmative action, were not racist.

It is the final insult of segregation that such unthinking logic is allowed to stand. In fact, anyone who knows black folks understands that Obama had nothing to lose—black people have been fleeing those same inner-city neighborhoods since the 1970s. To see Obama's point as a mark of courage or even a concession, you'd have to imagine a black America that woke up, every morning, thinking only about welfare and affirmative action. The olive branch Obama extended to white people came directly from the grove of black America, not from some newly discovered transracial hinterland. This is why Obama was able to secure South Carolina without becoming entrenched in the patronage schemes of various black preachers. Obama is a black man, and thus he needed no surrogates to translate for him, no verification from the crumbling CRIC.

Whatever comes of it from here on out for the larger country, Obama has redefined blackness for white America, has served notice that wherever we are, we are. What he is positing is blackness as a valid ethnic identity with its own particular folkways and yet still existing within the broader American continuum. Already a wave of black politicos—Deval Patrick, Corey Booker, Jesse Jackson Jr.—have raised a similar banner, and there is nothing "postracial," "post-black" or "transcendental" about it. (By the way, does anyone call Joe Lieberman "post-Jewish-American" or Mel Martinez "post-Cuban-American"?) Indeed, it is a deeper black, the mark of a less defensive, more self-assured African-American leadership. Our forebears, God bless them, held blackness like an albatross, which they sought to affix around the neck of white America. But this generation, Obama's generation, holds blackness like a garland, sure in the knowledge that the only neck it belongs around is our own. ■

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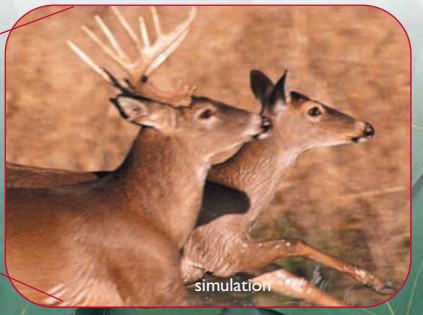

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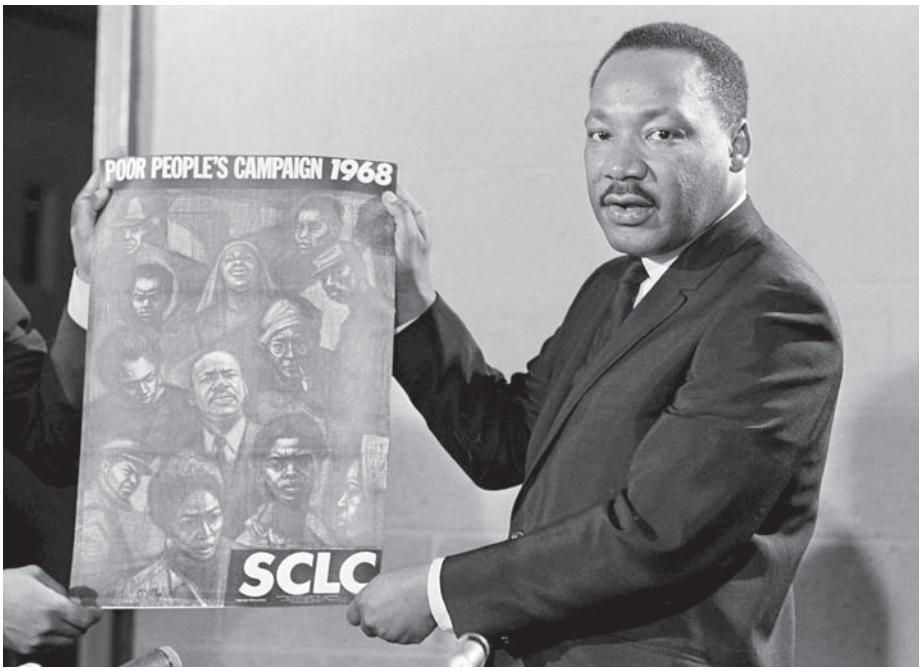

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Martin Luther King Jr. displays the Poor People's Campaign poster on March 4, 1968, in Atlanta.

Sweet Martin's Badass Song

by SCOTT SAUL

During his life Martin Luther King Jr. was, in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "'buked and scorned"—and by a quite diverse cast of enemies and associates. Segregationists called him "Martin Luther Coon" and "Martin Lucifer." J. Edgar Hoover had an FBI pet name for him—"burrhead"—and in public labeled him "the most notorious liar in America"; King's "I Have a Dream" speech so incensed Hoover that he stopped informing King of plots against his life and assembled FBI leaders for an all-day conference dedicated to "neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader." Lyndon Johnson reportedly called him "that goddamned nigger preacher" after King denounced the war in Vietnam, and neither Johnson nor the two living ex-Presidents attended King's funeral.

Within the civil rights movement, King faced constant heckling. Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who once welcomed King to his vacation home in Bimini, gloated shortly before his assassination that the day of "Martin Loser King" had "come to an end." Thurgood Marshall, who helped mastermind the legal attack on segregation but represented a more moderate wing of the movement, called King an "opportunist" and a "first-rate rabble rouser." Those who sought purposely to rouse the rabble also taunted King. The young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee mocked him as "Slick," or "De Lawd," and distinguished their grassroots-style organizing from his pulpit-based leadership. Malcolm X often referred to him as a "modern Uncle Tom"—an epithet given the twist of "Uncle Chicken Wing" by the Invaders, a Black Power group that injected a volatile energy into King's final campaign in support of striking Memphis sanitation workers.

Perhaps it's not surprising that King, who aimed to challenge and bridge long-standing divisions within the black community, the liberal-left community, the labor movement, the church and American society more generally, was such a lightning rod during his lifetime. Prophets, after all, preach from a lonely mountaintop, and a prophet who doubles as a movement strategist will raise even more hackles. More surprising has been the academic reassessment, over the past few decades, of King's role in the civil rights movement. Historians in the 1980s and '90s took a cue from King himself, who wrote that it was "the people who moved the leaders, not the leaders who moved the people," and dedicated themselves to recovering the unheralded efforts of the movement's foot soldiers, those activists who organized in Montgomery and elsewhere before King arrived and who kept doing so after he left. These historians helpfully directed our attention from the pulpit to the pews, and from there to union halls, student centers and beauty parlors.

Inevitably, perhaps, the larger-than-life King, the Moses of the movement, was downsized—into merely its megaphone. (Revelations about King's adultery and plagiarism no doubt accelerated the process.) As Clayborne Carson speculated in 1987,

> If King had never lived, the black struggle would have followed a course of development similar to the one it did. The Montgomery bus boycott would have occurred, because King did not initiate it. Black students probably would have rebelled—even without King as a role model—for they had sources of tactical and ideological inspiration besides King.…The black movement would probably have achieved its major legislative victories without King's leadership, for the southern Jim Crow system was a regional anachronism, and the forces that undermined it were inexorable.

This from the historian who was handpicked by Coretta Scott King to head up the Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. project, and who has since edited six impeccable volumes of King's speeches, writings and ephemera.

A clutch of recent books on King, however, suggest that the pendulum may be swinging in the other direction—toward a renewed appreciation of King's talents and impact. Taken together, they offer two corrections to the conventional view of King. First, they argue against accounts of King as mainly a civil rights leader who took on segregation: Michael Honey's riveting reconstruction of the 1968 Memphis strike and Thomas Jackson's intellectual biography

The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me
The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.
By Jonathan Rieder.
Harvard. 394 pp. $29.95.

From Civil Rights to Human Rights
Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice.
By Thomas F. Jackson.
Pennsylvania. 459 pp. $39.95.

Going Down Jericho Road
The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign.
By Michael K. Honey.
Norton. 623 pp. Paper $17.95.

Scott Saul, an associate professor of English and American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties. *He is writing a critical biography of Richard Pryor.*

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underline King's perennial commitment to economic justice and the plight of the poor, to a social gospel that targeted "materialism" and "capitalism" as value systems. They highlight the King who quipped, "It's a nice thing to say to a man, 'Lift yourself by your own bootstraps,' but it's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps."

Second, they convincingly describe how King's virtuosity—in church sermons, mass meetings and even closed-door strategy sessions—was integral to the movement's course. Uniquely among the civil rights leadership, King was able to stir black audiences and translate the black experience to those who stood outside it. It wasn't an easy balancing act to pull off, especially if both parties were listening in. "You just can't communicate with the ghetto dweller and at the same time not frighten many whites to death," he confessed in 1966. Yet he continued to try. An unusual sort of prophet—at once exhorter, therapist, great brain and badass—King gave the movement its fire in the belly and its half-concealed, half-inviting cutting edge.

King the "badass" is just one of many unconventional topics explored in *The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me*, Jonathan Rieder's eye-opening study of King's "righteous performance." Rieder considers King a moral virtuoso, but he takes an appealingly irreverent approach to the question of how King took on the prophetic mantle: "Becoming a moral virtuoso, like becoming an auto mechanic, a ballet dancer, or a surgeon, requires an unsentimental education." While other studies focus on King the political animal, Rieder meditates on King the performer, the preacher who made good on the boast he made to his mother at age 6: "You just wait and see. I'm going to get me some *big* words." Using big words—the biggest of which was The Word—Rieder's King is a man who delights in mixing Schopenhauer and slave songs, Paul Tillich and Paul of Tarsus, philosophy and prophecy; his power springs from his "uncommon ability to glide in and out of black, white and other idioms and identities in an elaborate dance of empathy."

The image of King as a crossover artist without compare is not an unfamiliar one, but Rieder refreshes this idea by following King far from the usual signposts of his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream" speech, and by examining King's performances with an unusual amount of scrutiny. "King the performer" includes the King who vented his mind in late-night shmoozefests, who played basketball with his

— A Call to the Media —

For many years men have awaited, impatiently to be sure, evidence that Maitreya* does in truth exist, and carries out his work among us. Why this doubt should for so long persist is, perhaps, difficult to understand, given the vast transformations of our world which have clearly taken place, each one foretold by Maitreya, and made available to the public and world media. What prevents the acceptance – even as a hypothesis – that such a welcome event has indeed transpired?

"The media of the world know every facet of this information, however little they inform the public of its nature."

The media of the world know every facet of this information, however little they inform the public of its nature. Many of its representatives have met Maitreya, have heard him speak, and yet stay silent themselves.

Laws

Why should this be so? What inhibits the public announcement of this welcome news? In the main the problem is fear: fear of ridicule, fear of disbelief; fear of loss, of their status or jobs; fear that they are somehow beguiled, that they did not see what they saw or hear what they heard. It is easier to set their experiences aside and to leave it to Maitreya himself – if he does indeed exist – to come forward and show the world his factual presence.

This view, logical enough to those who thus wait silently, shows little understanding of the Laws which govern the appearance of a Teacher of Maitreya's stature.

Many worthy Teachers come into our lives, do their work, and cause few ripples on the surface of men's thought and action. They seldom need forerunners to prepare their way. Maitreya, however, is the World Teacher, Head of Hierarchy, and intends to serve as such for the next world cycle. His impact on humanity cannot be comprehended. His coming is a truly momentous happening, which must be prepared for beforehand, and adequately explained to men of every station.

The world's media are ideally placed to acquaint men with the true happenings of our time. They are looked to for information, and often guidance, by millions of people thirsty for the truth, for knowledge and hope. It behoves the men and women of the media, men and women of goodwill, to acquaint *themselves* with this information, where necessary, and to serve the public by its serious introduction. Then will they see Maitreya openly, ready to show us all how to set to rights the world.

*This article, published in *Share International* magazine, was written by a Master of Wisdom. The Masters, headed by Maitreya, the World Teacher, are highly advanced teachers and advisors of humanity who are planning to work openly in the world very soon.

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lieutenants on staff retreats, who knew how to play the dozens, even the King who committed adultery in a hotel room bugged by the FBI and yelled, "I'm fucking for God!" and "I'm not a Negro tonight" in the throes of passion. The rewards of this method are obvious: while the various Pulitzer Prize–winning biographies of King have documented his political trajectory with admirable precision, they have also shied away from exploring the patterns of King's mind, how his faith was channeled into language that mixed polish and fervor, aggression and empathy, as it confronted the dilemmas of black liberation. Rieder provides the best anatomy of King's verbal imagination yet.

Because Rieder spends most of his book dealing with King in black settings, his "crossover King" looks quite different from the fuzzy icon of interracial understanding often eulogized at King Day celebrations. For Rieder, King crossed over many boundaries that were just as significant as the color line—for instance, the boundary between tough and tender. Crossing that divide partly involved a division of labor in the movement, with King providing the tenderness and his staff the toughness: while King preached nonviolence from the Birmingham pulpit, for instance, his streetwise lieutenants roamed the aisles, scouted out young punks in the pews and rousted them to give up their weapons. But the boundary was crossed in King's sermonizing, too. As King advised his staff at a 1967 retreat, in his own translation of Jesus' instructions to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew: "Be ye as strong and as tough as a serpent and as tender as a dove." (The King James translation reads, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves"—not quite the advice to give to a liberation army on the move.) The apostle of nonviolence had to be bold enough to tell Bull Connor to let his people go.

The tender-tough King was also, according to Rieder, a master at straddling the line between the prophetic and the pragmatic. It's easy to turn King into an icon of moral purity, an "American Gandhi" who levitated above real-world uncertainties through his unshakable commitment to nonviolence. Rieder will have none of it: King's moral virtuosity, he argues, was premised upon his ability to take on the hard-boiled questions "Will it work?" and "Why risk my life for this cause, this way?" The latter was a question that couldn't be waved away: at least twenty-six civil rights workers were murdered between 1960 and 1965.

In a striking section on King's performances at mass meetings, Rieder suggests that King succeeded by scrambling the customary calculus of pain and gain, the conventional framework of rational choice. With his motto "We will win you with our capacity to suffer," King rang a new variation on the archetypal badass, the man whose courage is so great that he forces his antagonists to factor irrationality into their equations of cause and effect. As a "prayer warrior," of course, King acted like a manifestly spiritual badass: he was emboldened—and emboldened others—with the premise that suffering was redemptive, that getting slammed by high-pressure fire hoses was a "baptism," that the tang of blood in your mouth was the taste of freedom. Success, in this new calculus, was measured not by legislation passed but by the existential "freedom high." Or, to use a metaphor King often drew upon: if you felt like you were in the wilderness, that was a sign that you were among God's chosen people, living out the Exodus story in real time.

No American Gandhi, King was able to straddle the line between the prophetic and the pragmatic.

In teasing out the subtleties of King's moral virtuosity, Rieder aspires to be something of an analytical virtuoso himself. Where King had an unparalleled ability, in Robert Penn Warren's words, to "affirm and absorb the polarities of life," Rieder is an analyst who refuses to let a paradox lie, a maker of fine and finer distinctions. He dilates, for instance, on how King used the sound figure "ohhh" as a "substitute" for the black preacherly tradition of whooping and hollering:

> Sometimes it had a wincing quality. It could be filled with pathos, at times preceding King's tender "I know," as if he had leapt right inside the audience's mind to absorb their pain. A grave, admonitory quality could suffuse it. As a prelude to "it has a power," "ohhh" was a channel to divine mysteries.

These sorts of ruminations disclose the artistry of King, the gradations of tone that make his oratory so powerful. But there is a thin line between the clever and the fanciful, and on occasion Rieder crosses it. Most sensationally, he dissects the meaning of the phrase King uttered in the heat of passion, "I'm not a Negro tonight," suggesting that this was part of King's attempt to "imagine [himself] escaping from blackness"—evidence of King's "postethnic" ambition to transcend race. Was it really? Here Rieder strains propriety and credulity at once. Perhaps "I'm not a Negro tonight" meant "I'm no longer the respectable leader of Negroes" or—taking a cue from Rieder himself—"I'm a badass tonight!" In either case, what Rieder interprets as an escape from blackness may just as well have been King's embrace of its darker hues.

This particular misstep points to a larger limitation of Rieder's book: its insistence on King as a "'postethnic' man who could articulate his complex sense of self by drawing from a rich repertoire of rhetorics and identities." "Blackness for King was in certain respects incidental and interim," Rieder writes, arguing that King's preaching shouldn't be classified as black theology. It's an odd turn for a book that has demonstrated how the black Baptist tradition gave King the genres he mastered and his lexicon of deliverance. The weight of Rieder's analysis pulls in another direction—toward a recognition of the universalistic strain within black Christianity. As he insightfully underlines, King's most universalistic messages were often expressed during moments of Afro-Baptist abandon, when King let loose the "fire locked up inside." To see these moments as signs of King's postethnic identity risks turning every black preacher who testifies to God's boundless grace into a spokesperson for the desire to transcend race. Better to say—as Rieder does—that King's universalism often worked to "blacken" the whites in his audience. At the climax of "I Have a Dream," King asked white America to imagine singing "Free at last. Thank God almighty we're free at last"—asked them, audaciously, to imagine black ancestors as their own.

Thomas Jackson uncovers a quite different King: the student of political economy and the crusader for the rights of the poor. Jackson's *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* rebuts the usual view of King as a '50s reformer who was then radicalized in the '60s, arguing that from an early age King fixated on the problem of economic justice. Though raised in an environment of relative privilege—his preacher father had changed his son's name from Michael to Martin Luther after being sent by his congregation on a religious tour of Germany and the Holy Land—King grew up wondering about black life outside that bubble. During summers off from college (where he majored in sociology), he worked as a manual laborer, partly to learn about workers' "problems and feel their feelings," and seethed at the wage gap between blacks and whites; he

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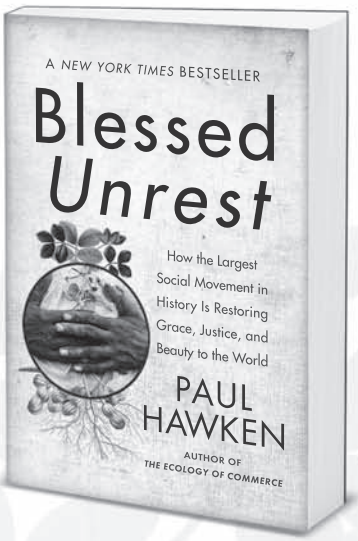
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ended up walking away from a job at Railway Express after the foreman called him a "nigger." While a seminarian, he took home *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* as his Christmas break reading, and proposed in his notes that "Capitalism carries the seeds of its own destruction," since it failed "to meet the needs of the masses." As a PhD student in the early '50s, he read Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward*, in which state ownership of industry solves the problem of scarcity, then wrote to Coretta that he was "much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic."

King's socialism at this point was largely speculative, general in its outlines, rooted in his skepticism of a value system that exalted the profit motive over the ethic of care. Jackson traces how the experience of the civil rights struggle forced King to sharpen his strategic thinking about the road to social democracy. How to tap into white working-class power without provoking white resistance? How to ensure, after the legal apparatus of segregation was dismantled, that blacks did not remain locked out of decent-paying jobs? How to leverage the federal government into taking on the inequalities rooted in "monopolistic capitalism"?

These were thorny questions, and the cascading events of the mid- to late '60s—the national white backlash that coalesced around George Wallace, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the wave of urban riots, the rise of Black Power—made them still thornier. To his credit, as Jackson shows, King acknowledged their complexity. His sociological writings became increasingly hard-bitten, as he explored how black poverty coexisted with white privilege. In 1964 he described poverty as "an airtight cage"; a few years later, he concentrated on who had built that cage and why. "The suburbs are white nooses around the black necks of the cities," he wrote in 1967's *Where Do We Go From Here?*: "Housing deteriorates in central cities; urban renewal has been Negro removal and has benefited big merchants and real estate interests; and suburbs expand with little regard for what happens to the rest of America." At the end of his life, King began suggesting that some combination of a domestic Marshall Plan and an attack on runaway corporate profits was necessary to make the "war on poverty" a success.

As King's analysis became more astringent and penetrating—and as he came out openly against the Vietnam War—his circle of allies contracted. In 1968 he decided to launch a campaign for poor people, hoping that poor people themselves would provide the ground troops for a huge rally in the nation's capital. But then he had to confront the limits of the civil rights organization he had built: the black middle-class ministers who were his most devoted lieutenants knew how to rally the faithful but were inexperienced in reaching out to the hard-core poor. "There's no masses in this mass movement," King worried a month before the date of the rally. He slept poorly; sometimes he could hardly speak from the constant stress on his vocal cords. This is perhaps, for King's admirers on the left, the most sobering aspect of his life: that he never felt lonelier than when he marshaled all his eloquence to condemn American militarism and inequality.

This was especially the case in a campaign usually treated as a coda to the civil rights movement and to King's life—the fight by Memphis sanitation workers for union recognition. It's an episode that Michael Honey's *Going Down Jericho Road* reveals to be an epic struggle, with a cast of characters and a gripping plot that put it on the level of a biblical spectacular. In some sense, Honey has spent almost four decades building up to this book: he worked as a civil liberties organizer in Memphis in the '70s, then trained as a historian and has since written a labor history of the Memphis civil rights movement and an oral history of black labor under Jim Crow. *Going Down Jericho Road* takes the long view on the Memphis campaign—King does not arrive in town until page 292—but the book is lovingly and scrupulously detailed, evoking the high drama that ensued after "the lowly" demanded respect. In the process, it also suggests indelibly how the movement made King, and how King made the movement.

The strike was triggered by a grisly outrage: two garbage collectors were killed, crushed in the compactor of their truck, when the equipment malfunctioned. (They had gone into the compactor to ride out a rainstorm—a typical practice. A union organizer had complained about this particular truck and had his grievance ignored—also typical.) The sanitation workers labored under conditions not far removed from slavery. They had no regular breaks, no place to go to the bathroom, no uniforms, no place to shower after work; their wages were abysmal, and when it rained—as it often did in Memphis—they would be sent home with only two hours' worth of pay. Their white supervisors often came from plantations in the Mississippi Delta and treated their employees accordingly: "boy" was the common term of address, even for elderly men, and some bosses even carried sidearms. On February 12, 1968—after discovering that the city had offered the widows of the two killed workers barely enough to cover burial expenses, and had docked their pay on that rainy day too—

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the sanitation workers decided to strike.

The strike rallied black Memphis in unforeseen ways, taking on a keen intensity. Police sprayed Mace on a peaceful march of black workers and clergy, radicalizing preachers who had formerly sat on the sidelines of labor struggles. Mayor Henry Loeb won an injunction banning union leaders from marching, picketing or making public speeches, but—in a perfect illustration of the law of unintended consequences—the injunction forced black ministers to assume leadership in the struggle and to mobilize the community as a whole; the strike thus became, in Honey's words, "one of the last unified mass movements of the civil rights era." Throughout the strike, the workers marched twice every day, and a different church hosted a mass meeting every night.

Enter Martin Luther King, exhausted from his efforts to piece together the Poor People's Campaign, detouring in Memphis over the objections of his advisers. King was shuttled to a mass meeting and was astonished at what he found: an enthusiastic crowd of more than 15,000, already deeply committed to a struggle for the dignity of the poor—a living illustration of the Poor People's Campaign of his dreams. King spoke as if from the whirlwind—"You are here to demand that Memphis will *see* the poor"; "If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty…*she too is going to hell*"—and the crowd roared its approval. Improvising, then, in response to their excitement, King decided to try to translate it into action. "You know what?" he asked. "You may have to escalate the struggle a bit.… In a few days you ought to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis." By the time King had finished his description of what the general strike might look like, the crowd was clapping, dancing, singing. Plans for a general strike soon coalesced.

This episode suggests, in an obvious way, what King brought to the movement: he gave many a sense of their struggle's deeper meaning; he emboldened them to imagine their triumph despite the odds; and then he mobilized them to channel their newfound strength into specific and confrontational courses of action. This is all true and hardly to be minimized. But *Going Down Jericho Road* draws out a less obvious, less public gift that King brought as well.

After King's first mass meeting in Memphis, very little went according to plan. The day of the proposed general strike, Memphis was swept by a freak blizzard, the second-largest snowstorm in its history; no one went to work, whether they sympathized with the strike or not. A week later, King led a march that disintegrated into chaos when some young blacks vandalized storefront windows, setting off a panicked response from the Memphis police and a declaration of martial law from Mayor Loeb. As police battled blacks in the streets, King lay in his hotel bed, his bedcovers over his head, his movement in free fall.

The next day, though, he met with members of the Invaders, a Black Power group that had encouraged the rioting and publicly blamed the march's failure on King's outmoded leadership. In person King was firm but open-minded rather than accusatory: he wanted to know why they believed in violence as a method of protest, then asked them to consider "what must be done to have a peaceful march." He had determined, he later said, that "Either the Movement lives or dies in Memphis." The Invaders, for their part, were amazed and moved by his calm. "It was unbelievable to me," one remembered. "The man just looked like peace. He didn't raise his voice.… [It was] one of the few times in my life that I wasn't actually fighting something."

This sort of dialogue was not unusual for King. Even as, at the pulpit, he assumed the role of Moses leading his people to freedom, in private conversation he tended to be principled but not dogmatic, channeling nonviolence when more brittle words might be expected. Stokely Carmichael once confided to King that he had debuted the slogan of "Black Power" at a march King had led, because he knew that King's presence would guarantee the slogan national exposure. King replied, "I have been used before. One more time won't hurt." Thus did King keep alive the promise of future coalitions even at the moments when the movement seemed to be splintering to bits.

King was assassinated in Memphis four days before he was to lead the nonviolent march he had promised himself and the movement. On the appointed day, tens of thousands of marchers—including black community activists, union leaders and rank and file, and religious leaders from a full array of denominations—walked through the streets of Memphis, dignified and completely silent. Members of the Invaders acted as marshals, keeping discipline, telling anyone with a cigarette to stub it out. Mayor Loeb, who said of the assassination that "we wish the incident had happened elsewhere—if it had to happen," finally buckled under pressure from white businessmen and Lyndon Johnson's appointed mediator. He recognized the union but paid for their wage increases with a garbage tax that fell most heavily on the city's poor. ■

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Director Errol Morris on the set of *Standard Operating Procedure*

Photo Ops

by STUART KLAWANS

Who is Pfc. Lynndie England? Anyone can tell you: she's the woman in the Abu Ghraib pictures. The world recognizes her as a slight female figure standing on the left side of the frame, holding a leash connected to a naked, manacled male figure sprawled on the right. Most people could place Spc. Sabrina Harman, too, if shown her most notorious snapshot. She's the grinning young woman who leans into the picture from the top, flashing the thumbs-up over an iced corpse. We know about England and Harman because of photographs; and from there, it's a short step to imagining that we know them through photographs.

No doubt the Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman who speak to the camera in Errol Morris's documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* are also creatures of photography. Colored shadows with a synchronized soundtrack, they live within the confines of Morris's film much as their younger selves are contained in the Abu Ghraib pictures. And yet when the silent, frozen figures of your memory give way to these images that move and talk, you are likely to feel a shock—not of recognition but of alienation. No longer the criminal gamin with boyish hair, England is suddenly a dour, resolute, puffy-faced woman dressed in a denim jacket. "When we first got there, the example [for treating inmates] was already set," she says defiantly. "It was OK." And Harman, with her thick curls grown out and her lips made up with color, now appears not at all like the sadistic, T-shirted imp of the still photographs. Sober but also a little ingenuous, she seems half gawker and half witness of conscience: "The first thing that I noticed [in Abu Ghraib] was this guy with underwear on his head, handcuffed backward to the window." Another "looked like Jesus Christ.... I had to laugh."

Once you gather your impressions of a dozen such interview subjects, weigh their testimonies, wince again at the display of photographs (far more of them than you've probably seen before) and mull over Morris's ghostly evocations of the setting, you may begin to understand *Standard Operating Procedure* less as a reconstruction of facts than as a study in estrangement. Morris wants you to sense the otherworldliness of Abu Ghraib, a place he represents as an airless, windowless, round-the-clock delirium of shouts and banging, filth and raw concrete, huddled bodies and incoming shells and bizarre, ritualized ordeals. He wants you to experience the absurd gap between what happened in that other world and how US officials characterize what happened. (The film takes its title from the categories of the Army's Criminal Investigations Division. As former CID Special Agent Brent Pack explains to the camera, no one from Abu Ghraib was indicted for placing a hood over a man's head, standing him on a box

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with wires attached to his arms and telling him he'd be electrocuted if he fell off, because that isn't a crime—it's standard operating procedure.) And Morris wants to estrange you from one more element of this nightmare: the pictures that were the primary evidence of its existence and the government's primary means for placing blame on a handful of guards. We know about the torture in Abu Ghraib because of photographs; but what we know through these photographs, as Morris demonstrates, is far from complete.

For example, the photographs seem to show Harman gloating over her victims. Was that why she took the pictures? In speaking to Morris, Harman claims an entirely different motive: she, too, was a documentarian. She didn't think anyone would believe what she'd found in Abu Ghraib, and so she took photographs as proof. In support of this story, Morris puts on the screen some of the letters Harman sent home, in which she expressed her unease at the events around her. But if that was how she felt, how does she account for her beaming face and approving gesture in the ugliest of the photographs? "It's just something that automatically happens," Harman explains. "When you're in a photo, you want to smile."

Lynndie England: "[Cpl. Charles] Graner never would have had me standing next to [the man on the leash] if the camera hadn't been there."

Spc. Jeremy Sivits, sentenced to one year in prison for photographing naked prisoners stacked in a pyramid: "I was asked to take [the picture]. I'm a nice guy. I took it."

Even in hell, it seems, people conform to the etiquette of photography: pose, say cheese, help someone record the scene. *Standard Operating Procedure* never suggests that these behaviors excuse what you see in the photographs; it merely points out, again and again, that you don't see everything. States of mind, stage directions, the presence of people just outside the frame—all these may have been significant at the time, but they're invisible now.

And so, too, is the prison's code of conduct. This is the biggest piece of unseen evidence, Morris argues: the set of military norms established in Abu Ghraib. Some of the soldiers who were caught in the photographs, and punished for being caught, adopted those norms with culpable gusto. Others simply soaked them up. ("We didn't kill 'em," a self-justifying England says of the prisoners. "We didn't cut their heads off.") But no matter which individual a snapshot memorialized, at whatever place and time, the camera could not record the governing etiquette, which held that you did indeed have to stop short of decapitation, though not by much.

Unable to bring this code into sight, Morris brings it into mind by interviewing Janis Karpinski, former brigadier general of the 800th Military Police Brigade in Iraq—the highest-ranked officer to have been punished for the events at Abu Ghraib. Buttoned up in a suit, Karpinski sits straight-backed before Morris's camera, her hair pulled tight, her chin jutting out, her voice controlled against quivers of rage, as she repeats a story she has now told many times. In September 2003, she recalls, her commander was insisting on a daily basis that she produce information leading to the capture of Saddam Hussein. To speed this process, Baghdad soon received a visit from Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller—"the guru" of interrogations, Karpinski calls him—who advised her superiors to "Gitmo-ize" Abu Ghraib: "You have to treat the prisoners like dogs."

Given the Army's version of police procedure, there were more and more dogs to be treated. Former sergeant Javal Davis, a night guard who was sentenced to six months in prison for his role in the photo sessions, explains that the method for uncovering insurgents was to sweep into an area and bring in every able-bodied man for questioning. "Taxicab drivers, welders, bakers. Imagine someone coming to your town and taking all the men in it." Imagine all the men going into Abu Ghraib and never coming out. "What's the release procedure?" Karpinski asks, with fury in her eyes but her voice still in check. "We don't have any resources to provide for the 200 prisoners…and now you're going to give us 1,500 more?"

Lack of food, lack of toilets, lack of adequate space in the cells, for a population that had been hauled in for the explicit purpose of being roughed up. Let's say a tone had been set. And to complete it, Karpinski recalls, she received orders that her guards were not to interfere with the various interrogation staffs—some military, some not—who were busily applying their inexperience. On this latter point, Morris has the testimony of a surprise witness: Tim Dugan, a robust, goateed man of middle years who interrogated prisoners as a private contractor in Abu Ghraib. With the gruffness you'd expect of someone in his profession, Dugan dismisses Military Intelligence as a pack of puppies trying to be wolves. They didn't understand the uselessness of their methods: A man being tortured will say "whatever the

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hell you want so that the pain stops."

You've heard that before, of course; but the statement gains new force coming from Dugan. You will most likely trust the image he conveys of weighty experience, just as you may read the severity of Karpinski's manner as probity, or interpret Davis's suppressed agitation as a sign of outraged conscience. The habit of moviegoing trains us to make snap judgments like these, discovering meaning in a tilt of the head or a catch in the voice. But if *Standard Operating Procedure* teaches you anything, it's to be cautious when seeking truth from a photograph—or, for that matter, from the snippets of a filmed interview.

This is where *Standard Operating Procedure* becomes problematic, I think—because Morris doesn't want you to apply his lesson in skepticism to the material he shot. Just as he's done in his films from *Gates of Heaven* through *The Fog of War*, he has brought his subjects before the camera to show you the candor, veracity, duplicity or self-delusion written on each one's features. You're meant to judge his people literally at face value—but now, in *Standard Operating Procedure*, he seems to expect you to go further and take some of their words the same way.

You can detect this departure from skepticism in the way *Standard Operating Procedure* sometimes overlays a subject's voice with a reconstruction of the scene that's being narrated. Morris has used such reconstructions before; but in the past they served to complicate the testimony rather than confirm it, the most notable examples being in *The Thin Blue Line*, in which the staged scenes showed contradictory images of the same event. Here, though, there's no critical distance between the voiceover and the conjured-up image. Witness Morris's statements about the evidence, as posted on the film's website. What Karpinski, Dugan, Davis and others alleged before his camera, Morris asserts as fact.

He's right to do so, of course. Independent confirmation in sickening abundance has poured in for Morris's view, most recently in the form of John Yoo's newly released memorandum of March 2003 on behalf of the Justice Department, setting forth for the Pentagon the very standard of conduct that would soon trickle down to Lynndie England: just don't cut off their heads. Many similar documents were readily available to Morris while he was making *Standard Operating Procedure*; but they never entered into the movie, perhaps because England, Harman and the others received no instruction from them. The guards learned how to behave mostly by looking around; and so, by relying for his evidence exclusively on pictures (talking and otherwise), Morris presents you with a challenge like the one these soldiers faced as they tried to draw conclusions based on limited sensory data.

But Morris isn't consistent in presenting his *Introduction to the Phenomenology of the Dungeon*. He ventures beyond what the guards saw, heard and thought by bringing in the contextualizing interviews—though this material, too, is puzzling, when you consider that Morris's portraits contain significantly less visual information than do the Abu Ghraib photos. The snapshots that he questions so rigorously are full of the circumstantial details of their setting, whereas the filmed interviews that he presents as self-evidently reliable show only a succession of isolated individuals—figures without a ground.

So I come back to the alienation effect that Morris practices in *Standard Operating Procedure*. He distances you from what you thought you'd known through the prison photographs; he distances you from the interview subjects, as presented in their undefined space. By means of these estrangements—which include a cunningly macabre musical score (not written by Philip Glass this time but by the far more pop-oriented Danny Elfman)—Morris achieves his stated goal. He creates "a nonfiction horror movie," in which the close analysis of photographs ultimately serves much the same purpose as a scientific discourse by Professor Van Helsing.

Strange ambition. Consider the fact that anyone who cares about this subject has already had the benefit of several years' worth of investigative reporting, as well as two award-winning documentaries—Rory Kennedy's *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007) and Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007)—that cover much the same territory as *Standard Operating Procedure* but with far less fuss. What does Morris contribute by the addition of atmospheric effects?

As a critic, I am required to ask that question. As a citizen, I will wait to reply, since I don't yet know how audiences will respond to the peculiar emotional tone of *Standard Operating Procedure*. Information, by itself, has failed to arouse a sufficiently large public; exposés have nothing left to lay bare. So let's see what Morris can do with a little art. The methods may be fancy and the date of release a bit late; but if this movie succeeds in horrifying people, its shortcomings will be no more consequential than the awkward framing of the snapshots from Abu Ghraib. ■

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BACK TALK

ADRIAN BELLESGUARD

John Turturro

Moviegoers know John Turturro as a character actor who's as comfortable in bowling shoes or police blues as he is behind a typewriter or under game-show lights. He's no small fry as a director, either—most recently of the film *Romance & Cigarettes*, which he also wrote. Until May 18, he's appearing as Hamm, a blind man who can't stand up, in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. —*Christine Smallwood*

How did you get involved with this project?

Last year BAM was thinking about putting together a company, and they talked to me about it. This is one of the plays they were thinking of doing, under Sam Mendes. The whole thing fell apart, but I recommended Andrei Belgrader, who was my teacher at Yale and who I've worked with before—I did *Waiting for Godot* with him and Tony Shalhoub.

I didn't know Tony Shalhoub did *Waiting for Godot*.

Tony's worked with Andrei a lot. And a good friend of mine has always been a big Beckett fan. When my wife and I got married, he was my best man, and I asked him to read something, and he read an excerpt from *Malone Dies* about these two old people having sex. It's a wonderful thing about these two old people trying to have sex and they both were never beautiful, and she says it doesn't really matter, we're less hideous than we used to be. She has a great line where she says there are pears that ripen only in December, and this is us. Everyone was on the floor dying laughing when he read this. The older you get, the more you realize how realistic his plays are. They just kind of strip down—or everything is taken away—and what's left is the bare bones. I could easily rehearse this play for three months, and I would not be bored at all.

It's not draining?

It's really draining—five pages or ten pages is like a whole play. I've been reading it for the last year. You have to descend, as Beckett says, into the core of the eddy. You have to go down, you can't go out always. He's amazingly good. He can be so profound and so cheap. It's just great. Once you've been through life and loss and all this and things.... Also, you realize people who are outside of society, whether they're sick or mentally ill, they understand what it is to be looking in and not have all that stuff in the way. The play really deals with that: when everything's taken away, what really do you have? You have another person, maybe, to torture or to love, or to both. As Clov says, Why should I stay? Hamm goes, "The dialogue." It's quite humbling, actually, to do it the way [Beckett] wanted it done.

What do you know about the original manuscript? Is it very different from the version most of us know?

It's two acts. He distilled it. They read from the Bible. They read the story of Noah. [Hamm] says, Now I'm in the mood to procreate, and he calls for his girl, and Clov leaves and comes back dressed as the girl. And Hamm says, I really don't want to have sex because I don't want to procreate. But obviously their relationship is father, son, husband, wife.

You've been drawn to this kind of humor your whole career.

It's my kind of humor, really. That other kind makes me laugh from my neck up. I like the human comedy. You know, life really is a tragedy, because in the end we all die, but the day-to-day existence is really a comedy. That's when something's at its best, when it's not one thing or the other. It's like we were saying yesterday, there's people dying all over the world and somebody sprains their ankle and says, Look how bad my suffering is. And [Beckett's] very aware of that stuff. I suffer more than you, 'cause it's mine. It's horrible. Babies do that and little kids do that and adults do it, too.

You've said that today you "don't see people...struggling with their problems in a movie" like you used to.

When you answer everything, it's not as interesting. You give a false thing. We all like to have that sometimes, but when everything does that and you see people who are always equipped to handle something, it just does a disservice to your own problems. It's good to reach for something, because you start to understand that the great thing about a story is that it's not just a diversion. Take a story like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—you see that every day. You see that in the story of Eliot Spitzer. That's what great things are. People equate popularity with something being great or something being good. It can take a while for people to catch up to it. Beckett is an example of that. A movie like *Nights of Cabiria* is related to what I'm doing in a play. No matter what, at its worst, life goes on. It's a tragic comedy with a great kind of Chaplinesque ending. These things are all related. I see people today trying to be great, and you can't be great without being human.

How is it, sitting so much?

My ass hurts, I'm telling you right now. They're going to have to give me a softer cushion. ■

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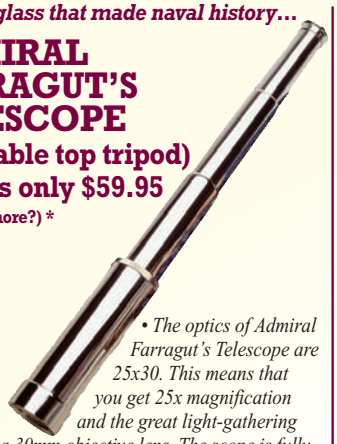

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